COMMONWEAL

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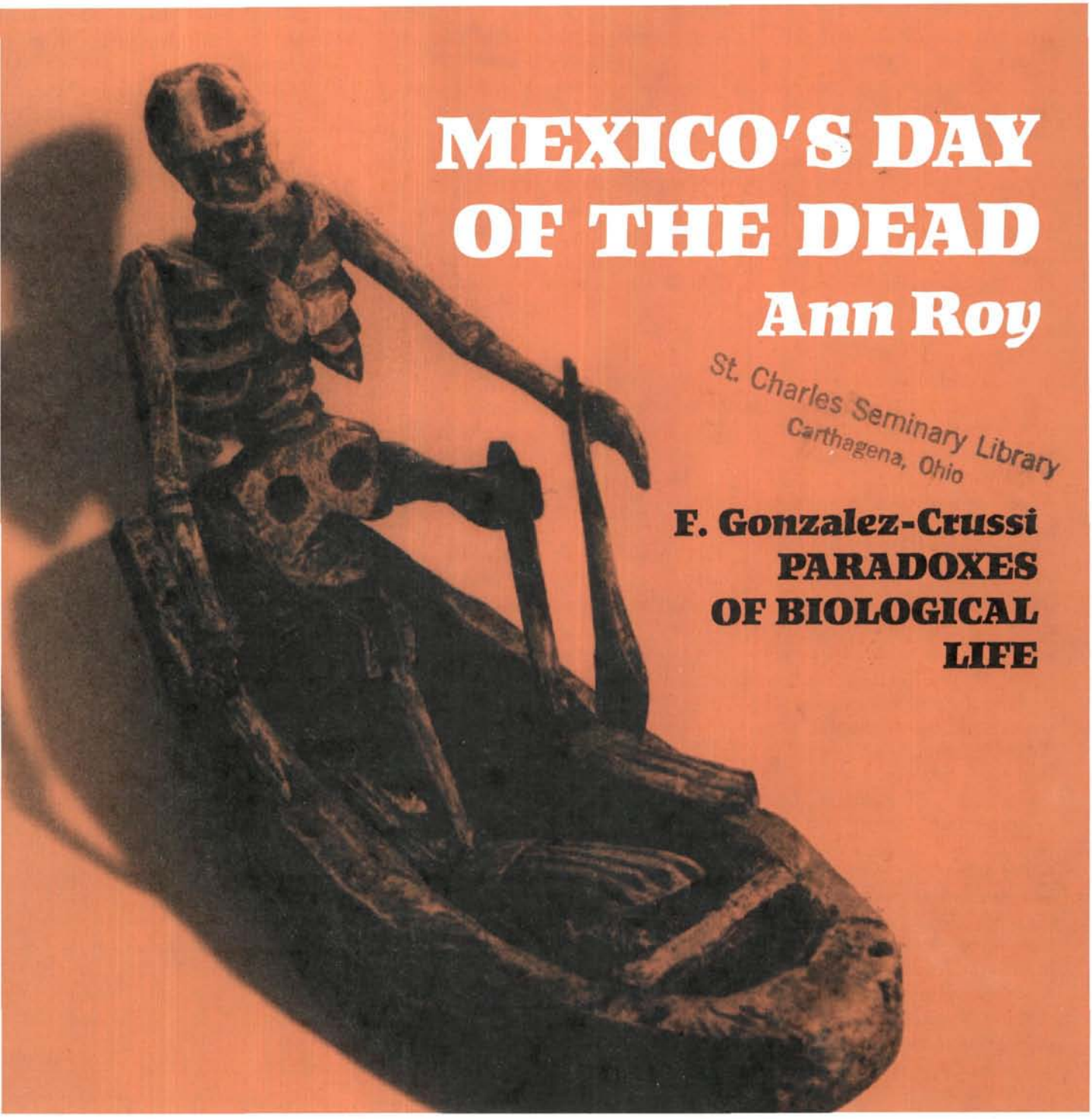

MEXICO'S DAY OF THE DEAD

Ann Roy

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F. Gonzalez-Crussi
PARADOXES OF BIOLOGICAL LIFE

How about a second party?

E. J. DIONNE, Jr.

NELL on 'Sandman'

EVA reviews 'Clockers'

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To the Editors

Buy the rug that smiles

I was watching a Chicago Cubs baseball game on television when my dad came downstairs and read to me the article by Abigail McCarthy on child labor ("Pulling the Rug out," September 22).

On May 1,1995, I participated in my first demonstration. I am almost eleven years old and in the fifth grade. I live in Chicago, but the demonstration was in New Delhi, India, when it was 100 degrees.

The demonstration involved kids from all over India who carried signs saying, "Stop Child Labour" and "Child Labour Is a Cruse [This is how it was written on the sign] on Humanity."

Many of the kids had worked in carpet factories for twelve or fourteen hours a day, every day of the year, for many years. A lot of them didn't get any money at all. But a few were fortunate enough to get a little, like about six or seven dollars (or 200 rupees) a year. But that money went to pay off the debts of their families. If the boys did not do their work, they were beaten. Sometimes their fathers got beaten too, when they tried to free their sons.

I met some of the older boys in the demonstration when my dad and I went in a motor rickshaw to the Mukti Ashram, a place where boys who had been freed from the factories learn how to read and to do something other than weave carpets. The head of the Ashram is a man named Kalash Satyarthi who freed many of the boys. Some of the boys had been kidnapped to work in the factories, and some did not know their own age.

The rugs that the boys made go to Europe and the United States, and they are very expensive. But if the rug has the "Rugmark" logo (a rug with a smiley face on it), it means that the rug was not made by a child slave.

JOEY SPIELBERGER
Chicago, Ill.

An informed source

I'm about to leave on a trip but not without telling you how much I enjoyed the articles by Joseph Policano and Gary Prevost (September 8). That compliment may gain weight when I mention that I am a Cuban-American journalist whose work at a human-rights organization includes clipping articles on Cuba in the national and international press. Bravo!

SILVIA B. ZIMMERMAN
Washington, D.C.

The emperor is off his nut

Re: Your issue [September 22] on "Catholicism and Popular Culture": My main point of contention with aficionados of Mapplethorpe, Serrano, etc., is their insistence that we ignore subject matter.

I contend these artists deliberately and consistently select material to shock and offend, and then, when we react accordingly, we are met with a pained expression, a patient sigh, and variations on "You just don't understand."

We are all uncomfortable with censorship, but viewers have a right to note that the emperor is not only buck naked but is oftimes engaged in some pretty bizarre behavior.

Am I missing something here?

BILL MCTAGGART
Logansport, Ind.

Hagen was right

The editors are to be congratulated on addressing the important issue of the congruence or conflict between values expressed through American popular culture and the values of Catholicism. I urge you to continue the discussion because the current offerings [issue of September 22] are just a beginning. Dennis O'Brien's essay was so nebulous that in spite of reading it twice I could not discern what his point was. John Hagen ("It's Time to Take Sides") was utterly "right on" (to use a popular phrase) in his critique of *Commonweal*'s reviewers, and I thought Richard Alleva's and Frank McConnell's rebuttals were inadequate to the issue at hand.

Ultimately, aesthetics and morals intersect. A truly profound cultural critique is needed to understand why we have become a culture obsessed with the portrayal of viciousness, death, and ugliness (to wit, your own brief report on the "art" of portraying dead, decaying cows). I do expect sophisticated, aesthetic, and moral critique from the "leading Catholic intellectual journal." It's the reason I have been a faithful subscriber for twenty-five years.

MARIE HOFF
Boise, Idaho

Alleva to the rescue

I want to thank Richard Alleva for his good review of *Pulp Fiction* [November 18, 1994]. It saved me from missing an innovative and re-

(Continued on page 4)

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COMMONWEAL

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markable movie. I am as much appalled by violence as is Alleva's critic, John D. Hagen, Jr. [September 22], and I deplore, with Senator Moynihan, "the nonchalance of many Americans toward violence in our culture." But surely violence in a work of art is not the same as violence in the streets or in our houses. One is an esthetic decision, meaningful or sleazy. The other is sinful and possibly criminal.

I can't understand, though, why Alleva calls *Pulp Fiction* a "romanticization" of the gangster milieu. Yes, the characters and events of the film made that milieu look funny, but also pitiful and most repulsive.

I hope we don't return to the good old days when cheers and laughter sounded whenever "another redskin bit the dust," and naive little girls had no idea what happened in Joan Crawford's *Grand Hotel* room.

ELIZABETH MCMENAMIN
Scranton, Pa.

The emperor is rich

Your contributors' commentaries on the relationship between Catholicism and popular culture reveal, among other things, the spookily pervasive position Madonna occupies in our collective psyche. But neither they nor your editorial pay enough attention to the inexorable economic physics of our society: To be popular is to be profitable. Our "material world" has put the pop of real dollars and economic markets in pop culture. Culture is determined by profitability.

Catholicism stands (or, sometimes, kneels) in the face of an ethic of materialism, of value by majority vote, and of an all-too-human inclination to greed and self-preoccupation which much of our market-driven popular culture so assiduously exploits. Grace may infuse us at unlikely times—as when Bruce encores with "Born to Run," or the Bills gal-

vanize Buffalo—but greed puts *Pocahontas* on our sleeping bags and Shaquille O'Neal on our gas station cups. Catholicism provides, among other things, the detachment to help tell the difference.

CHRISTOPHER F. KOLLER
Buffalo, N.Y.

Categorical Carlin

I do wish David Carlin, Jr., would devote as much space to dissecting Catholic conservatives as he used in dealing with Catholic liberals (read: Democrats) ["A Liberal Catholic Taxonomy," September 22].

I wonder how he would classify Congressman Henry Hyde, who is quite rightly anti-abortion yet fully supports Newt Gingrich's views on welfare, child care, and education. Is Hyde to be considered an exemplary Catholic, while Edward M. Kennedy and Daniel Patrick Moynihan, who backed the bishops on welfare, are outside the pale?

Former Governor Mario Cuomo once remarked that journalists love terms like "liberal," "conservative," "neoliberal," "neoconservative" because they serve as cheap substitutes for thought. Categories oversimplify matters, and I think Carlin engaged in that exercise in this column.

Don't get me wrong. In many ways I admire David Carlin; in fact, several years back I voted for him in his unsuccessful run for Congress. But I think he ought to remember that there are other Catholic issues besides abortion.

(REV.) JOHN P. MAHONEY, O.P.
Providence, R.I.

We have no upstairs

Over the years you have occasionally altered *Commonweal*'s look and typography, and—although I might have preferred the 1978 style—I went along. Now I must protest.

This September 8 style must go. Bring back August 18!! Kick upstairs whoever is responsible.

You may put ads any place except page 2 (which is for Correspondence) and page 3 (which is for editorials). Does Crossroad now dictate policy on Dutch Street? Is someone on the take? A little payola? Better to raise the ante on Associates than lose your soul.

Contents belong, unobtrusively, to the left of editorials, where they may be read at a glance. Must I range over a whole page? What is this, the new *New Yorker*?

As for Correspondence, which used to be printed, let me paraphrase Truman Capote on Jack Kerouac. This is not printing, it's *typing*. And it is very annoying to try to read.

JOHN F. MAHONY
Mahopac, N.Y.

Yes, but...

Looks different? Yes. Like it? Oh, yes! But...please, don't touch that familiar, privileged, inside-front-cover Correspondence spot: I can't help resenting any full-page ad that keeps me from turning blindfolded to your readers' reactions.

And yes, keep the "Last Word" on the last, inside-back-cover page, and not on page 30, where it appeared in your inaugural "new-look" issue of September 8.

But don't worry; what really sells *Commonweal* is substance, not style. All the best!

(REV.) LARRY N. LORENZONI, S.D.B.
San Francisco, Calif.

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The pope at the UN

As reported ahead of time in these pages ["Caped Crusader Conquers Gotham," October 6], John Paul II swept New Yorkers and just about everyone else within reach of a TV off their feet during his whirlwind and rainsoaked visit. Youthful seminarians were heard to gush about John Paul's resemblance to Jesus, admiring rabbis crowned him a *mensch*, and even hard-bitten journalists anointed him the "most charismatic man in the world." Just one of the intriguing paradoxes surrounding the pope is his mastery of the media event, a celebrity-driven spectacle that he himself might dismiss as a symptom of the "culture of death" in other contexts.

But as the pope advises, we must get beyond the pomp and the glitz to the substance of things. Happily, John Paul is indeed a *mensch*, and seldom short on substance. At a time when mean-spiritedness toward the disadvantaged seems to dominate American politics, John Paul vigorously urged us to live up to our better selves. He implored us to care for and respect the poor and to welcome and value the immigrant. He quoted Lincoln on the moral foundations of society, and reminded Americans of our obligations to the unborn and of materialism's delusions and snares. Most important, in his address to the UN, the centerpiece of his trip, John Paul issued a ringing affirmation both of the UN itself and of individual freedom and cultural pluralism. John Paul's UN address also offered a careful exegesis of freedom's dependence on human solidarity and international cooperation. It was a speech worthy of a pope who so palpably longs for world peace and unity as the millennium approaches.

To be sure, there is no shortage of broad conceptual visions for how humankind should act and how the world ought to work. Getting the peoples of the world to move, as the pope eloquently urged, from a reliance on coercion to a faith in persuasion is admittedly the harder part. Still, this pope brings a rare authority to what might otherwise seem like mere diplomatic protocol. That authority rests on several factors. His personal sanctity and self-discipline, his honest regard for "the other," his travels to every part of the globe, win him a respectful hearing in precincts ready to dismiss lofty language and abstract formulas. His sophisticated philosophical thinking, married to an outspoken faith, produce an undeniable *gravitas*. But most compelling, perhaps, is the richness of his personal experience. When this Polish pope, a witness, as he noted, of the depredations of nazism and communism, speaks of the universal yearning for freedom, the inviolable dignity of the individual, and the right of peoples and nations to self-determination, we hear a voice that speaks with both authority and authenticity.

John Paul's UN speech often evoked what many regard as the most humanizing political experience of this century, Eastern Europe's peaceful "Velvet Revolution" of 1989. "The politics of nations," he told the UN in words that could have been Vaclav Havel's, "can never ignore the transcendent, spiritual dimension of the human experience....Whatever diminishes man—whatever shortens the horizon of man's aspirations to goodness—harms the cause of freedom."

What is remarkable about the pope's rhetoric was the effort to seek a kind of

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common language that is both faithful to Catholic principles and yet forges a bridge to those who might be suspicious of any specifically Christian philosophical idiom. Indeed, throughout John Paul's speech he acknowledged the vital "tension [that exists] between the particular and the universal," between the spiritual aspirations and inherent dignity of all people and the specific, multifarious cultures that give unique expression to our humanity.

Because we recognize that all people share an inalienable human dignity, the pope said, we must protect the rights of all, especially of the poor and helpless. He questioned the economic utilitarianism of advanced societies and championed the good of "weaker nations." Such enormous disparities in wealth "offend the conscience of humanity." The UN has a large role to play in alleviating economic and other inequalities, and "needs to rise more and more above the cold status of an administrative institution and to become a moral center where all nations of the world feel at home."

In that context, the pope strongly defended the practical significance of the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights, calling it "one of the hightest expressions of the human conscience in our time."

At the same time, John Paul recognized that human existence is limited by place and time. Thus, we must respect different cultures, since "every culture is an effort to ponder the mystery of the world and in particular of the human person: it is a way of giving expression to the transcendent dimension of human life."

How are we to make sense of these apparently conflicting truths? This is the perpetual challenge. John Paul's speech exemplified the absolute commitment to both human dignity and to a respect for human differences that keeps that "vital tension" alive.

OF SEVERAL MINDS

DAVID R. CARLIN, JR.

ON THE WAY TO THE ALTAR

Should priests be allowed to say 'I do'?

I admit to having no very decided convictions on the burning question of whether the Catholic church should create a class of married priests—either by permitting priests to marry or by ordaining married men. Still, from time to time I tune into the marriage-celibacy controversy, and both sides in the debate astonish me by the weakness of their cases.

The procelibacy side astonishes by its reluctance to argue at all. For the most part its attitude seems to be this: "We are in possession, and possession is nine points of the law. We occupy all the powerful positions in the church. So why waste time with arguments? The celibacy of the clergy is a solidly established fact, and solidly established facts don't need to be defended with good reasons. They are their own good reasons."

In an earlier age this may have been realistic, but not today. It is a prudent thing to let sleeping dogs lie. But this particular hound has been wide awake for some time now, and is barking like the devil. To pretend otherwise is folly. Silence is no longer golden.

If the procelibacy folks don't rouse themselves and offer a spirited and persuasive public defense of their position, they will eventually lose the game by default. True, they may hold onto key power positions for another generation or so, but with time these will slip away. "Ideas govern the world," said Auguste Comte. And so they do, at least in the long run. Once Catholic lay opinion accepts the idea—as today it largely does in Europe, Canada, and the United States—that a married priesthood makes sense, it will not be long before the hierarchy swings round to the same view. Even in the Catholic church the rule holds that the customer is always right. It just takes a little longer for customers to prevail in the church.

On the other hand, the promarriage folks astonish by the triviality of their argument, which largely boils down to this: The problem of the priest shortage in the United States—a shortage, they add, that will grow steadily worse over the next generation or two—will be solved by having married priests. But this assertion raises a number of critical questions which the promarriage people rarely or never address.

First, if married men are ordained priests while women are still excluded from the priesthood, won't this exacer-

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bate the church's already troubled relations with women?

Second, how do we know there is a shortage of priests? If we speak of a "shortage," there must be some "right number" we have in mind. But what is this standard? What is the correct ratio between laypersons and priests? Absent an answer to this question, the concept of a "priest shortage" makes no linguistic sense.

Third, predictions that there will be small numbers of priests a half-century from now are based on the assumption that current trends will continue. But there's this funny thing about trends: they always come to an end. That's why we call them "trends" and not "laws." Roger Bannister broke the four-minute mile in the mid-1950s. If the downward trend in mile records for the past forty years continues for the next four hundred years, by the year 2400 some human will run the mile in less than two minutes. But don't bet on it.

Fourth, while the married-priest solution will no doubt increase the number of priests in the short run, how will it work out in the long run, say, over the next century? Once the first wave of enthusiasm has passed and Catholic priests become indistinguishable from, say, Presbyterian ministers, will a life in the priesthood continue to prove attractive?

Fifth, what about the law of unintended consequences? For a thousand years mandatory celibacy for priests has been a pivotal characteristic of the Catholic church. And in the millennium before that, priestly celibacy, though not required, was clearly the ideal—from which the mandatory celibacy of the second millennium was a quite logical deduction. Can any organization drop an institution that has played so critical a role in its history without provoking revolutionary transformations, perhaps even dissolution? Remember Gorbachev, who had no intention of destroying the Soviet Union when he detotalitarianized it.

The oddest thing of all about the promarriage party is that it seems to have little sense that the Catholic priesthood is a sacral institution trying to survive in a largely desacralized world. At least this is the situation that prevails in the United States, Canada, and Europe. But enchanted plants cannot grow in disenchanted soil. If the Catholic priesthood is to flourish, one of two things must happen: either the larger society must be resacralized, or Catholics must create a sacralized enclave for themselves within the larger society. (Neither alternative seems likely at the moment.)

The promarriage party is correct in having an acute sense that there is a fundamental incongruity between the celibate priesthood and contemporary culture. It would like to eliminate this incongruity by allowing priests to marry; which is to say, by bringing the priesthood in line with contemporary culture. But won't this produce a desacralized priesthood? And isn't a desacralized priesthood a contradiction in terms?

The Catholic church has a rich intellectual heritage. It is a pity this heritage is so little drawn on in the present controversy. Instead the promarriage party says silly things like, "This will solve the priest shortage," while the procelibacy party acts as though it had taken a vow of silence as well as a vow of celibacy. □

OF SEVERAL MINDS

ABIGAIL McCARTHY

GOING IT ALONE

Americans are no longer joiners

At last, it seems to me, responsible professionals are beginning to concede what anyone with plain common sense recognized long ago—television has ripped apart the social fabric of the nation.

At the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association in September, Harvard Professor Robert D. Putnam enjoyed a respectful hearing of his thesis: that the surge of television watching in the 1950s did much to bring about a precipitous decline in social trust and group participation.

One of the most noteworthy characteristics of American society in the early years of our republic was the proliferation of associations—charities, choral groups, church study groups, book clubs, etc. Alexis de Tocqueville saw these as good for democracy. In joining such groups, Americans reached beyond the family, learned to trust other people, to know other people, and to work with them, thus becoming more public-spirited. Such association-building was so much a part of American life that it used to be jokingly said that when more than two Americans got together they formed a committee.

No more. Putnam's research shows a steady decline in the percentage of people joining groups—from political and fraternal groups to hobby groups and bowling leagues. (His essay "Bowling Alone" evoked national interest in the decline.) In an interview with *Washington Post* (September 3) writer Thomas Edsall, Putnam elaborated: "The social fabric is becoming visibly thinner, our connections among each other are becoming visibly thinner. We don't trust one another as much, and we don't know one another as much. And, of course, that is behind the deterioration of the political dialogue, the deterioration of public debate."

Of course, there have been many changes in our society over the past forty years. Why single out TV? Isn't it possible that the decline in trust and participation was caused by a combination of high divorce rates, women leaving the home to join the work force, people living in one place (the suburbs) and working in another, middle-income workers being transferred from one part of the

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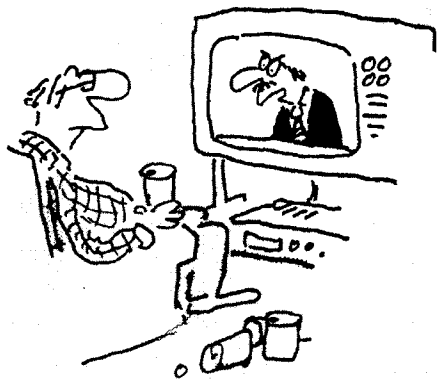
country to another, etc.?

Putnam says not. The decline set in, according to his research, before these changes began. He blames the sudden intrusion of television into the life of the nation in the 1950s. Families owning television sets went from 10 percent of the population to 90 percent in only eight years. He sees a direct correlation between the hours spent watching television and the number of groups a person joins. Interestingly enough, it is different with newspapers. "The more you read newspapers, the more trusting you are. The more you watch television, the less trusting you are."

The importance of this social fabric, "the social capital" on which democracy depends, is elaborated in Francis Fukuyama's *Trust: The Social Virtues and the Creation of Prosperity* (Free Press). Earlier, Fukuyama, a social scientist, had argued in *The End of History* that the centuries-old debate over the ideal form of government has been decided in favor of democracy allied with capitalism. He now argues further that democracy—the form of the state on which we are globally agreed—depends on a "healthy and dynamic civil society," as does capitalism. Many of the positive elements of our society have depended on the art of association—the labor movement, the women's movement, the civil rights movement, even political parties—and we have scarcely been aware of it. All of these also depended on a basic optimism and good will engendered by the dynamic of people sharing an effort. (Groups can and have been formed for purposes alien to the common good but they are easily differentiated by the fact that they weaken rather than strengthen the social fabric.)



"Don't you think you've watched enough?"

The decline in participation has been precipitous but we have only, little by little, become aware of its effects. Most serious is the decline in the numbers of those who vote, which has resulted in the election of extremists intent on dismantling our social safety nets for health care and the alleviation of poverty. And where are the groups opposed? Let us heed Senator Patrick Moynihan's heartsick cry on the Senate floor after the vote on the so-called welfare reform bill:

"Why do we not see the endless parade of petitioners as when health-care reform was before us in the last Congress, the lobbyist, the pretend citizen groups, the real citizen groups? None are here.

"I can recall the extraordinary energy that went into any change in the welfare system thirty years ago, twenty-five years ago. Fifteen years ago, if there was a proposal to take forty dollars out of some demonstration project here on the Senate floor there would be forty representatives of various advocacy groups outside.

"There are very few advocacy groups outside....Not one of those flaunted, vaunted advocacy groups forever protecting the interests of the children and the helpless and the homeless....

"One group was in Washington yesterday, and I can speak with some spirit on that. This was a group of Catholic bishops and members from Catholic Charities. They were here. They were in Washington. Nobody else. None of the great marchers, the great chapters, the nonnegotiable demanders...." □

E. J. Dionne, Jr.

WHY WE NEED A SECOND PARTY

When will the Democrats organize?

Before Americans embark on an adventure with a third political party, they might consider the advantages of having a second political party.

At the moment, there is only one organized political force in America, and that is conservative Republicanism. The exceptional discipline shown by Republicans in Congress is only the most striking sign of this. Less noticed is the role played by Republican National Chairman Haley Barbour, who is not just a mechanic but also a broker who links policy, politics, public relations, and advertising.

At the grass roots, conservativism thrives through the Christian Coalition, the National Rifle Association, and assorted antitax and term-limits groups. Conservative Republicans have a loud voice in the popular debate—Rush Limbaugh's is the loudest, but he has slews of local allies and imitators. Conservative foundations spend their money with clear political goals in mind, unembarrassed by getting into the thick of partisan fights.

Above all, despite many differences of view, there is on the conservative side the sense that a common project exists and is worth pursuing: the Contract with America symbolized this even before its particulars were formulated. As the conservative writer David Brooks wrote last spring in *Commentary* magazine, "Even when conservatives differ over items in the Contract, there is built into the movement a sense of solidarity with the effort as a whole."

Among liberals, and among Democrats of all stripes, solidarity has become an antique notion. At the grass roots, the basic institutions of liberal and Democrat hegemony—notably the unions and the urban political machines—are in disarray, as the writer Harold Meyerson will show in a forthcoming book called *The Disorganization of America*. Pieces of

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the old coalition have their own sets of concerns and there is no agreement on a common project, other than defeating Newt Gingrich. There is little unity among Democrats or on the center-left on the desirability of reelecting President Bill Clinton.

Indeed, elements of the old coalition spend almost as much of their time attacking each other as in going after their Republican foes; witness the polemics between the "New Democrats" at the Democratic Leadership Council and the labor-oriented liberals at the Economic Policy Institute. These fights may not have a huge resonance outside Washington, but they are an important sign of the intellectual discord in the party as a whole. And, of course, there is the disjunction between the "centrist" strategy being pursued by the president and the seemingly more traditional strategy being pursued by congressional Democrats, especially in the House.

The contrast between liberal, Democratic disarray and conservative, Republican coherence has an impact well beyond the quest for electoral victories. It also radically redefines the country's political agenda. The quest for sane, "centrist" policies on the budget, welfare, crime, and other issues is reasonable enough. Mostly, the country wants to reform, not dismantle, government. As a rule, Americans are impatient with ideologues and don't think in sharply ideological terms.

But where is the "center" going to form if the debate is so one-sided—if a clear line of argument on the one side, backed by substantial resources, confronts poorly organized cacophony on the other? The center just keeps moving toward the side that's organized and vocal. A perfect example of this is the welfare bill passed with overwhelming Democratic support in the Senate. Dismantling the entire system of federal guarantees for poor children would have been considered radical and dangerous even a year ago; most *Republicans* were against it. Now a bill that does just that is labeled "centrist" simply because the alternatives are even more radically skewed to the right.

As a result, most Senate Democrats and the president himself are going along with something they would have condemned with words such as "heartless" just a few months ago. Had Democrats been able to reach agreement on a welfare reform bill last year, they could themselves have defined "the center." Their failure to find solidarity behind a practical measure thus had a huge substantive cost here, as also on health care and political reform.

Clinton's effort to set himself up as a "centrist" battling Republican "extremism" has helped him recover some ground in the polls, partly because a lot of what the Republicans are doing is not very popular, and partly because the strategy distances him from congressional Democrats, who aren't very popular themselves.

But this strategy only fitfully addresses the larger problem the president and the Democrats confront: that the country has no idea of what an affirmative Democratic program would look like and little confidence that Democrats

could agree to pass such a program if they ever decided what it was. The strategy also seems to accept that the political initiative will remain in Republican hands not only in Congress—that's inevitable through 1996—but also at the level of ideas. Instead of defining the middle ground of politics, this approach risks becoming a chase for a center moved ever rightward by a skilled and well-organized ideological machine.

The risks for Clinton himself are twofold: If stalling the Gingrich Revolution becomes his central purpose, many voters may decide that Colin Powell could do that job as well or better. And if Clinton is reelected, how will he govern when the Republican party is dominant, the Democratic party is enfeebled, and third parties keep threatening to be born? □

E.J. Dionne, Jr., *is a columnist and editorial writer for the* Washington Post *(this column* © The Washington Post). *He is the author of the forthcoming:* They Only *Look* Dead: Why Progressives Will Dominate the Next Political Era (Simon & Schuster).

Robert Fleet

THE UNDERWORLD IN RUSSIA

It's been there all along

American media were shocked by the assassination of Moscow journalist Vladislav Listyev last March. Listyev was a TV personality, and his shooting was reported as akin to killing Geraldo Rivera. The murder also highlighted a new fear in relations between the former superpower opponents—that Russia, center of the deceased Soviet empire, is descending into criminal anarchy.

But long-time observers of Russian society do not offer such a hysterical analysis. Neither, however, do these observers offer much comfort. Russia always has been violent, experienced commentators say, and it is the nation's newly

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developing free press that is bringing the violence to light.

Journalist Sergei Kostin's *Dangerous Epic: The History of Soviet Nuclear Submarines* (Laffont, Paris, 1992) established his credentials as a critic, not an apologist, for his country. According to Kostin, Russian criminal activity was not snuffed out by decades of repressive and puritanical Soviet communism. Instead, the criminal underworld was strengthened by persecution.

"Negative selectivity" is how Kostin describes the process. Under the Soviets, only the most ruthless and devious could survive in government—particularly during Stalin's rule. What was true in party circles also held for the criminal milieu: undisciplined, "soft," or one-time criminals were quickly put away, leaving the strong and clever.

Corruption was rampant in the Soviet system. It was encouraged by the criminal networks. They understood the advantages of compromising *apparatchiks* with extralegal perks—as Kostin uncovered for a documentary titled *Red Mafia* (made during the waning Soviet years). Faced with choosing between Stalin's gulags and a bad conscience, few party officials suffered any ethical crises. By the time reformers such as Khrushchev and Brezhnev came to power, the ties between criminals and the *apparatchiks* were thoroughly entrenched.

Communists did not invent the criminal underworld, just as they did not invent the repressive institution of the secret police. Both were legacies of Czarist Russia. Autocratic government was a structure Lenin adapted to his "revolutionary" purposes. The criminal underclass the Bolsheviks inherited had long experience in surviving in a police state. Western critics of current Russian society should not be surprised by this ancient alliance. Read Dostoevski, or Gorki's *Lower Depths*: like Dickens in Victorian England, these writers found violence, criminality, and corruption pandemic in feudalistic Russia.

This does not absolve the Communist era from culpability. The worst legacy of the Soviet Union is that it warped the Russian's everyday concept of what is criminal and what is not. Let me give you an example. Guided through Moscow in late 1992 by Sergei Kostin, I participated in the following exchange while purchasing groceries at an expensive, Western currency store.

"Let's buy from the old ladies outside," I suggested. "Their price is half."

Sergei was disdainful. "I'm uncomfortable with speculators."

Speculators? The concept meant nothing to me in that context. Sergei explained, "We were taught to despise 'speculators.' In the Communist system, everyone worked—speculators make money doing nothing."

How were these ladies "speculators"?

"They sell salami for 400 rubles—I know they pay only 300. Profit for nothing."

"Where do they buy it?"

"Outside the city."

"They are 'speculators' because they buy meat cheaply, bringing it from far away, so you can pay 100 rubles more for it—without having to spend hours traveling?"

Sergei answered reluctantly. "There is nothing wrong with what they do. I know that. I am a journalist supporting economic reform. But...."

He raised his eyes, seeing the unstated assumptions behind his reactions. "We were taught all our lives that making profit is wrong, it's capitalist exploitation. Before reform can happen we have to learn a new way of thinking."

The IMF and Congress have yet to take such thinking fully into account when they make economic demands on Russia.

Where do such cultural biases leave Russians now? In some respects, in the same situation the United States was in at the close of Prohibition. While Kostin and other East European observers make no claim that the Soviet police state resembled that of America circa 1932, he does note that in both instances a criminal "resistance" evolved as a result of arbitrary, selective persecution. Police and government officials became corrupted by the unfair way in which laws were administered—leading to grassroots tolerance of criminal activity.

We all like our Robin Hoods. However, though American tradition embraces John Dillinger and Bonnie and Clyde as folk heroes, this is not a Russian sentiment. Russians are rule-followers, order-oriented. They look down on the criminal with a disdain that would make J. Edgar Hoover proud.

In another sad similarity to an American social crisis, the criminal underclass in Russia is largely an urban group comprised of non-Russian minorities drawn from the former Soviet empire. Under Communist rule, the intermingling of ethnic nationals was enforced by decree; "democracy" leaves these *émigrés* stranded in an ethnically chauvinistic society that does not readily accept them. Yet just as a second generation Chicano in L.A. has fewer ties to Mexico than to his "hood," so too with young Georgians, Azerbaijanis, and the like. For these resented and isolated groups, crime is a form of survival and crude protest.

Finally, and most important in understanding the current

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rise of crime in Russia, is the violent legacy of Soviet communism itself. Russia seemed less criminally violent until recently because it was officially violent. There was less crime in 1937 than now, but the price for security was paid by thousands of "enemies of the state" summarily rounded up and shipped off to gulags or executed. Buildings were constructed with false walls where the police spied upon occupants. On one night in 1938 virtually half the Politburo was removed from an apartment building, with their families, and never seen again. That scenario was replayed on every level of the "classless" society. Russians learned to avert their eyes. High and low, powerful and insignificant, in the paranoid police state Stalin perfected, violent crime existed—they simply called it "enforcing order."

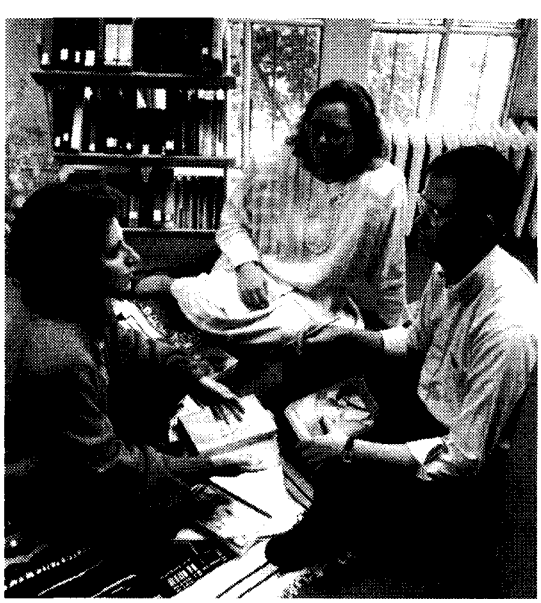
Khrushchev and Brezhnev did reform the worst aspects of this horror, but the memory kept the populace cowed. Until the Afghanistan war injected a wave of disillusioned Soviet Army veterans into the society, Russians "enjoyed" a much less visibly violent society than people in the capitalist West. To many living in Moscow today those days have taken on a mythic quality.

But Kostin and other Russians hope that there is an opportunity to outgrow such myths and create real social order. Like post-Prohibition America, successful Russian criminals generally do not encourage their children to enter the family "business." They seek legitimacy by mainstreaming their offspring. In the old system, though, the "mainstream" was as corrupt and dangerous as the underworld. With the new Russia comes opportunity. As the *apparatchik*-styled Communists die off, so will many of the old-line criminals.

In the immediate wake of the Soviet Union's demise, the pendulum swung to total freedom in Russia. I could walk up to the Russian "White House" in November 1992 without being stopped at all by guards. In their wish to throw off the repressions of the Communist state, Russians left a void of authority. A strong, ruthless underworld stepped into that void. The Murder Inc.-style death of Vladislav Listyev and others has shaken up the squabbling politicians, giving them public support to fight back against lawlessness and anarchy. Whether the Russians can stop short of authoritarianism is the question. Still, the rush of violence now filling Russian newspapers is not new: discussing it out loud is.

Criminal anarchy does threaten the social fabric of Russian society. But only by exposing it, as journalists are doing, can the problem be addressed. Democracy is not just free elections, though Americans often believe that's all it takes. Democracy is also an attitude of openness that does not shrink from the responsibility of facing the unpleasant. □

Robert Fleet *is a filmmaker and free-lance writer living in California. This article was written with the cooperation and research of Sergei Kostin and Alina Szpak.*



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Bill Broderick

DOES YOUR DIOCESE HAVE A COUNCIL?

No sacralization without representation

Does your diocese have a Diocesan Pastoral Council? I learned recently that mine does not, but since it is quite conservative in many ways, I assumed that it was in a small minority. After all, there are explicit provisions in the 1983 revision of the Code of Canon Law (Canons 511-514) setting up guidelines for how the council is to operate, specifying, among other things, that membership should include "especially lay persons," who should "reflect the diverse regions, social conditions, and professions of the diocese." More importantly, the revised code reflects the Second Vatican Council's affirmation that lay persons, through baptism, have an indispensable role in the mission of the church.

But there's a catch. According to Canon 511, the pastoral council "is to be established" in each diocese "to the extent that pastoral circumstances recommend it." Obviously, that's not a requirement. (In contrast, Canon 492 mandates the creation of a Diocesan Finance Committee.) Nevertheless, in the light of Vatican II's revaluation of the lay vocation, and given our bishops' respect for church law, one might expect that thirty years after the council most bishops would be willing and eager to make use of the relevant experience and expertise of lay people in dealing with a range of pastoral concerns.

Or so I thought, until I looked further. From a 1984 study on diocesan pastoral councils, sponsored by the Bishops' Committee on the Laity of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, I learned that of the then existing 169 Latin rite geographic U.S. archdioceses and dioceses, only 89 "had active pastoral councils as of May 1984" (*Building the Local Church: Shared Responsibility in Diocesan Pastoral Councils*, September 1984).

Also in 1984, the survey was complemented by three regional convocations "to explore the successes, the frustrations, and the hopes of shared responsibility as it is being lived out in the church in the United States." Eighty-one dioceses were represented at one or another of these convocations, and some 200 persons—bishops, priests, religious, and lay persons—took part, many working together in small groups. According to *Journeys Together*, published by the Bishops' Committee on the Laity in 1985, participants were in agreement on three requirements for success: the commitment and support of the local bishop; a clearly defined role for the councils; and good relations with priests' councils (not always present). Their concluding view was that "despite the issues and problems, diocesan pastoral councils are surviving and growing in effectiveness."

At this point, only 52.7 percent of U.S. dioceses had pastoral councils. To see how the optimism of the 1984 meetings was translated into action in the following decade, I turned to the massive 1995 *Official Catholic Directory*, which lists all offices, councils, boards, and committees of every diocese, and found—to my dismay—that the number of pastoral councils has now shrunk to 67, or 38.5 percent of the current total of 174 dioceses—a decline of 25 percent over ten years. Apart from the shrinking numbers, there is little information publicly available about how the existing councils actually function—that is, how and how often they are put to use by their bishops.

How might such councils help? Would they be one more church bureaucracy, impeding action, leaking confidential information, possibly creating dissension?

Could be. But consider the many tragic cases of pedophilia among a minority of our clergy: clearly a pastoral problem. Until quite recently, the actions taken by some bishops in dealing with the issue have been morally questionable, illegal, counterproductive, and/or expensive.

Suppose that a bishop faced with this problem ten years ago had sought advice from his pastoral council. Is it conceivable that a group including Catholic parents would have advised the kind of actions (denial, cover-up, blaming the victims, transferring known offenders to other parishes) that some bishops actually took? Conceivable, maybe; but likely? No. It's obvious that merely creating a diocesan council will not guarantee its effectiveness. Not all parish councils (or priests' senates) work well. But there truly is a lot of talent out there. And Vatican II did give us a new understanding of the People of God on pilgrimage. And there is that Canon 511; if it's not a mandate, it's at least a strong suggestion. Surely somebody should be discussing when "pastoral circumstances recommend" creation of a council; and who better than the National Conference of Catholic Bishops? I propose that at an early date it set out to explore and answer these questions in a public way:

- Why haven't more bishops set up diocesan councils?
- What is the experience gained in those dioceses that do have councils? How are the members chosen? What access to information do they have? How free are members to press their views? Since Canon 511 makes utterly clear that the councils are purely consultative bodies without independent power, are they in practice only for show?
- In dioceses without councils, how do their ordinaries seek counsel from representative lay people other than employees of the church? Or do they? If not, what does that say about these bishops' adherence to Vatican II?

Conceivably, these discussions might benefit from participation by lay men and women. It would be a start. □

Bill Broderick *is a retired U.S. Foreign Service officer now living in Arlington, Virginia.*

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A CRACK BETWEEN THE WORLDS

The Mexican way of death

Ann Roy

Newly arrived in Guanajuato many years ago, I was fascinated by the colorful displays of sugar skulls and skeletons that suddenly appeared on the streets just before Halloween. How quaint! How Mexican, I thought. This was the real thing, at last!

But I was puzzled and hurt when a particularly warm, bright, new acquaintance I had felt was becoming a real friend arrived at my house one afternoon and presented me with a purple tissue-wrapped bundle, which proved to contain a fine hard-sugar (*alfenique*) skull, the size of a large grapefruit and giddy with rococo squiggles, flourishes, and flowers. Sinister glowing red tinfoil eyes glared from its hollow eye sockets, and across its bony forehead was inscribed in elegant Victorian script: "ANA"

I was appalled. What unwittingly horrendous cultural error had I committed, what had I done to this woman to make her wish me dead? I have no idea what I said to her at that time, but as soon as she left, I rolled the thing back into its purple cocoon and hastily hid it away in the bottom of a cupboard. I didn't mention it to my American husband.

Several days later she came back. Looking around my living room, she said, "Aren't you going to make an altar for you *calavera*?" When it became obvious I hadn't the faintest idea what she was talking about, she explained, and I received my first lesson in the tradition and meaning of the Mexican Day of the Dead. The elaborate sugar skull with my name on it (which she had ordered specially) was a warm token of deep regard, offered only to favorite friends and family members.

I dug it out of the cupboard and she helped me set it up on the mantel, and suggested that I add a photograph of my father, at that time my only close deceased relative. The next day she dropped by with an armful of golden *zempasuchtli* flowers (a type of marigold), and helped me arrange them with special candles in little glasses that had golden crosses on the sides. As we worked she explained that the candles should be lit all during that night, November first to second, when the dead are remembered and honored, and that the presence of my own *calavera* was a reminder that we are all mortal, and that the living are not really separated from the dead at all: Life and death are one single, never-ending continuity.

Some years later we moved to Tepoztlan, Morelos—the pre-Aztec mountain village renowned for its powerful magical traditions—and an ancient Tepozteca neighbor came to tell me about the "crack between the worlds" that opens up there soon after midnight on November first, and is held open for one mystical hour by the concerted ringing of all the church bells in the valley. She explained that she was telling me about this opportunity well ahead of time so that I could complete all the necessary preparations and be quietly ready to call and receive my own dead when this precious moment arrived—when all the bells began to toll softly together. I would have to be prepared early, she said, because my dead had so much farther to come—all the way from the United States!

"Some people not from here feel afraid at this time," she added. "But that is only because they do not understand. No one with any sense is going to call back people they disliked or feared. Why waste such a wonderful opportunity to be together with those we love? So it is only our loved ones we call, and during that time when the bells hold the door open, this valley is filled with the powerful, loving presence of many souls. They embrace us and we them, and we are all together again, for a while."

This is a vision of death very different from the lily-white, Anglo-Protestant, Midwestern American one I grew up with in Tulsa, Oklahoma, where death is dreaded, rejected, and denied; where it is regarded as the opposite and enemy of life, and the less said about it the better.

ANN ROY, *a writer and artist, has lived in Mexico for over thirty-five years. She taught at Ivan Illich's Centro Intercultural de Documentacion (CIDOC) in Cuernavaca. She now lives in San Miguel de Allende and is working on the publication of a bilingual, bicultural collection of poetry.*

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Anne Porter

Five Wishes

I'd like to have a wild bird
Perch on my hand
Perhaps a sparrow
Or a chickadee
Sudden with her sharp feet
And fragile daring

I'd like to see again
The etchings Rembrandt made
Of stories from the Bible
For though they're plain
As Bethlehem's hay
A homely radiance fills them

And I would like to visit
The Laguna Indians
And their adobe villages
And their small ancient church
That's made of whitewashed clay
With wooden rafters

And their Madonna
To whom they've given
An apron of white lace

And I would like to learn
To accept my death
To accept our dying

Which is a scandal
And a mystery
But part of us

Meant to be part of us
Like sleep
Like giving birth

And I would like to find
The little shrine of Chimayo
Where the lame leave their crutches

I'd like to go there
With my daughter Katie

And it would be enough
Just to be there
Without any miracles.

After many years of sharing in the life of Mexican villages, where death is accepted and even celebrated as an ongoing part of daily life, I was appalled to experience a personal death back in the United States where everyone seems to be joined in a conspiracy of silence to pretend that death does not exist, and where the newly dead seem to have simply vanished, as any mention of them is taboo in polite social conversation.

My children grew up in Mexico. At the end of 1968 I returned with them to Tulsa, and we were there when my mother, their grandmother, died in the hospital. This happened late on the night of December 23, and the family decided to put off the funeral until December 27, "so the children could have a nice Christmas."

We spent that Christmas Eve at my brother's house with his wife and their three children, all several years older than my eldest. It was indeed a "lovely evening" full of good food and warm family feeling, but not a word was spoken about their grandmother: She was not referred to, her name was never mentioned. It was as if she had never existed, or as if, by dying, she had committed the ultimate social *faux pas*.

Later in the evening my brother returned us to my mother's house, where he and I had grown up, and where I was staying with my children. After he left, I got out the Christmas stockings we had always used, and prepared to tack them up along the front edge of the living room mantel. My four-year-old listened big-eyed to my tale of how Santa Claus would come right down this chimney (now full of flickering artificial gas logs) to fill their stocking as he had done for me and their Uncle John when we were little. The elder, Ian, age eleven, had disappeared into the back of the house.

I was getting ready to look for him when he marched into the living room, carrying a framed photograph—my mother's favorite—of both my parents laughing at some long-ago picnic. It had always stood on top of her writing desk. Without a word, Ian pulled a stool over to the mantel, climbed up, set the picture squarely in the middle, climbed down, and disappeared again. This time he came back with a pair of red vigil candles in tall brass stands he had somehow spotted inside the big mahogany sideboard in the dining room, where my mother kept the silver services and holiday table decorations. Climbing up onto the stool again, he placed these carefully on each side of the picture, and then climbed down and again left the room.

This time he was gone longer. When he returned he was carefully carrying a full-size sheet of newsprint from his big drawing pad. On it, in different colored Magic Markers, filling the whole sheet, he had written: "I LOVE YOU!" Back up on the stool, he selected thumbtacks from the box I was using to hang the stockings, fastened the message to the edge of the mantel, neatly centered below the picture, then climbed down and sat in the middle of the sofa to appraise the effect—still without a word.

Dumbfounded, I realized that to my child's thoroughly Mexican sensibilities, the unmentionable nonexistence of his

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grandmother's death was profoundly disturbing. It was bothering me, too, but I didn't know what to do about it. Ian had obviously decided that if no one else in the family (including me) had the simple good sense to do the correct and necessary things for his grandmother, he would just have to take care of it by himself.

I lit candles, turned on the Christmas tree lights, and darkened the room. Then we all three sat on the sofa and sang the familiar carols, as we had always done on Christmas Eve, before going to bed. Ian seemed well-satisfied.

When the red candles burned down, I replaced them with others from the tidy little box in the sideboard that my mother had been keeping for Christmas. If I forgot, the children reminded me.

The next surprise came at the funeral. The whole family was present, sitting together in the front rows of "our church," Trinity Episcopal. The closed casket stood on a draped stand near the altar surrounded by banks of flowers. The traditional service was dignified and reassuring, the eulogy brief and sincere, but properly restrained. There were no overt displays of emotion of any kind, unseemly or otherwise. My children sat quietly beside me.

When it came time to accompany the casket to the cemetery, my sister-in-law summoned one of the limousines, put all three of her teen-age children into it, and ordered them taken home.

My children, of course, came to the cemetery with us. We were escorted to folding chairs arranged in a row on a rug of artificial green grass, and shaded from the thin cold winter sun by a green-and-white canvas awning, as if the sky might do us damage. In front of us, the casket was invisible, fully draped by a voluminous modesty-skirt of green baize, which also completely disguised the fact that there was a hole underneath.

Numb as I was, I suddenly realized exactly where we were when I glanced down to see my father's headstone peeping out from under the coy carpet of plastic grass, just beside my left foot. My mother, of course, was being buried at his side.

Father Eckel's resounding bass spun out the ancient graveside words ("Ashes to ashes, dust to dust..."), and we were each given a flower to add to the mound already on the casket. Then an attendant firmly grasped my elbow to lead us back to the waiting limousines. I turned to my broth-

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er. "But—it's not over!" I gasped. "Come along," he replied, not looking at me. "We're supposed to go home now."

In a daze I allowed myself to be steered to the cars and deposited with my children into a vast new-smelling back seat. It seemed very big and lonely back there as we moved away at a dignified pace. I managed to glance out of the rear window in time to see the attendants hastily striking the canopy, sweeping the mounds of flowers off the casket, and whipping aside its covering skirt. I strained out the window, but we were gone before I could see more. I felt a deep need to see my mother's body safely into the earth.

It was my first "American funeral." No hole. No body. Even the coffin camouflaged. No dirt. Nothing. Nothing real but the tawny tough short grass in the thin winter sunlight, the wide pale-blue prairie sky so far above. I couldn't believe any of it, couldn't feel a thing but the deep ache of a sense of having been cheated.

My children pressed close to me as we were driven away. I had a sudden clear memory of the afternoon several years before in Marfil, Guanajuato, where we lived when we first moved to Mexico. I was having a hard time convincing Ian that he must return the broken, earth-stained skull he and some friends had picked up in the *panteon* (cemetery) behind our village church. He wanted desperately to keep it and clung to the rule of "finders keepers." I had to explain at length that it actually belonged to someone else, though it seemed to have been abandoned. I went with him to put it back where they found it, and he was very cross; I suppose the other kids just retrieved it later.

This understanding and acceptance of death—as an integral part of the cycles of life that Mexico taught me—continues to sustain me over the years. □

MICROCOSM IN A BOTTLE

The silk rope of life & death

F. Gonzalez-Crussi

As a young intern assigned to the pathology laboratory of a Catholic hospital run by a monastic order, I was ill-prepared for some of the routines. The nuns administered the place with exemplary efficiency. At each key post an overseer or coordinator (may the youthful levity of those who said "spy" be forgiven) saw to it that cleanliness, order, punctuality, and systematic avoidance of waste prevail throughout the establishment. Not that the vices that stand in opposition to these virtues held me in their grip, for as a newly arrived immigrant in the United States I was perhaps overly conscious of the need to produce a good impression through meticulous respect for the rules, but I still felt anxious and insecure.

One afternoon, upon the unexpected absence of a regular worker, I was put in charge of describing the gross appearance of the specimens removed at surgery and submitted to the laboratory. This is a daily routine, utterly familiar to pathologists: diseased organs, biopsied tissues, and even inert foreign bodies extracted from the interior of the body must be carefully inspected, weighed, measured, described, and sampled for microscopic examination in the manner most likely to document the existing pathology. The day's allotment of tumors and inflamed viscera had already been arrayed on the counter—spoils of the unending mayhem between scalpel and disease, daily enacted in sterile battlefields worldwide—when I caught sight of a batch of containers set aside. These were bottles identified as "products of conception" on the respective labels. I assumed this to be one more example of the unswervingly methodical ways of the good sisters: specimens of like character were grouped together to facilitate my task. These specimens were the first I chose to take care of.

"Products of conception" is common medical terminology that, for once, means precisely what it says: if there is reason to believe that a woman has conceived, and subsequently tissue exits her uterus spontaneously (in a Catholic hospital one is not likely to see any but spontaneous abortions), such tissue may reasonably be regarded as the product of the conception. The intervention of the physician may be required when retained remnants cause persistent bleeding and other complications. The surgeon scrapes off the interior of the uterus in the operating room, and sends all tissues recovered to the pathology laboratory.

Inside the tight-lidded containers there seemed to be blood clots. My duty was to scan them looking for evidence of placental tissue and, haply, an embryo or its parts. I was on the second or third specimen, reciting into the dictating machine the accustomed formula: "The specimen is received wrapped in saline-moistened gauze, and consists of

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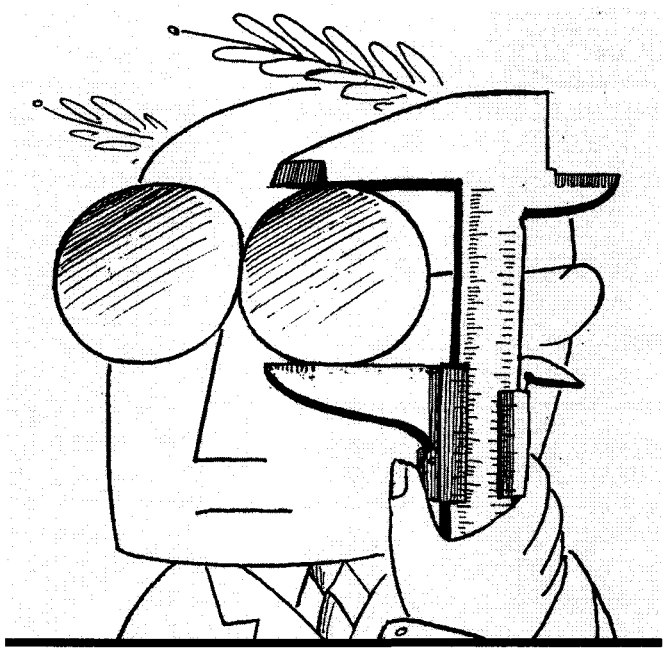
multiple, irregular, crumbling fragments with the appearance of blood clots"—when I felt a tug on my arm. Behind me stood the "lab sister," clad in full monastic regalia head to toe, rosary at the belt and emblazoned insignias of her order on the large cloth that fell in front of the bodice; and she looked at me with a reproachful and impatient gaze from thickly bespectacled, cool gray eyes that dominated her gaunt face.

I turned to mush instantly. Mesmerized by her gaze, whose strength seemed as if concentrated by the suppression of all other details in the wimple-framed head; unable to understand her speech, couched in a language still largely unfamiliar to me, I stood still, looking like the personification of the most abject idiocy. She ordered me away from the workbench, availing herself of peremptory gestures and the peculiar increase of voice volume and pitch with which some people address foreigners, as if convinced that conceptual impasse can be made to tumble, like the walls of Jericho, by the simple expedient of increasing sound volume. I was obscurely conscious that I was at fault, but uncertain as to the nature of the gaffe. Nor could I see the road to atonement when I hesitated between addressing her as mother or sister, and between bowing, curtsying, or kissing her ring with one knee bent to the ground, as I thought the humble always did to those invested with the majesty of the church.

I withdrew to respectful distance, as she motioned me to do, and thence appreciated the cause of her displeasure. Products of conception are not surgical specimens like any others. Bloody, ill formed, insignificant, and clot-like as they seem to the viewer, they must be treated with special regard: not as castoff fragments of a perishable body, but as beings potentially capable of independent life and possessed of immortal souls. Truth to tell, most of the bottles had nothing but blood clots inside. In some, bits of placental tissue could be subsequently identified with the aid of the microscope. But somewhere in those bottles there could be a human embryo, a fully formed, albeit incipient human being, claiming for itself the rightful spiritual dues that the church magnanimously extends to all its brethren. Therefore a liturgical service was appropriate. And therefore I stayed away, looking contrite, while the "lab sister" prayed, and repeated invocations, and sprinkled holy water with a makeshift aspergillum over rows of glass bottles labeled "products of conception."

The lesson was not lost on me. I understood that the pathologist must handle certain surgical specimens that deserve/merit greater respect, compared to others, by virtue of an intrinsic metaphysical status. From then on, these specimens I would leave untouched, until after the nun assigned to the laboratory had performed the appropriate rituals. I was less clear as to the nature of these ministrations, their instrumentality and function. Because in the Catholic creed baptism is indispensable, I realized that the sister baptized the products of conception, and I could only reflect with sadness on the



number of immortal souls to whom this benefit is denied. Every day, over 500,000 conceptuses live beyond the first week, and are thus brought to the very threshold of implantation in the maternal womb, but fully one-half are lost. Spontaneous abortion may then occur in 8 to 33 percent of pregnancies after implantation, as diagnosed by a sensitive hormonal method (assay of HCG, or human chorionic gonadotropin), often before the mother is aware of being pregnant. Later, when pregnancy is recognized clinically through physical examination, the incidence of spontaneous abortion is still 10 to 25 percent of all pregnancies.

But specific protocols, not metaphysical considerations, enjoin the pathologist to approach the products of conception with delicacy and circumspection. The experts are clear in their admonishments: use not formalin, which brutally hardens structures and alters their color, but sterile saline; and the containers should be well closed to avoid dryness. Gently tease the specimen under saline, and view it with a camera-equipped dissecting microscope, ready to photograph the slightest detail. What will you see? Crumbling, crimson-blackish blood clots, in which fibrin threads or bits of endometrium add an iridescent fringe. Often this is all, the products of conception having been previously lost. But patience and perseverance will bring future rewards.

On occasion you will come across a tiny, translucent sac, thin as a grape's skin and full of watery contents. The excitement of anticipation then seizes you: does a homunculus lodge inside? Incise the cover with infinite care, and a viscid fluid oozes out: an embryo is nowhere in sight. Empty, "anembryonic" sacs are not uncommon; either the embryo never formed or it was blighted very early in development and resorbed. Or else the embryo is there, but in a disappointing guise: looking like a tiny pale nodule in which it is impossible to distinguish front from back, top from bottom—"nodular" embryos are soon aborted—; or like a cylinder,

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up to one-third of an inch tall, in no way reminiscent of a living creature.

Sooner or later, though, the dissector will be rewarded: the bounty of an intact human embryo, at last. Such a specimen begins to be discernible with the naked eye at about twenty days postconception, when it measures 1 mm from crown to rump. At this time it has begun to curve, and soon will be C-shaped. Two to four days later it measures 2-5 mm and evinces rudiments of eyes, in the form of little black specks; cardiac activity may be discernible by ultrasonography. At twenty-six days the embryo shows rudiments of upper limbs, which are first like confused protuberances, then like fins. It is doubtful that anyone can prompt it to paddle away, as Hippocrates allegedly succeeded in doing, by immersing it in cold water. In truth, you cannot tell if you are looking at the 4 to 5 mm embryo of a bird, a mouse, a lizard, or a human: so great is the homogeneity that early life imprints on all creatures. Its look is distinctly amphibian. And it has a tail. At thirty to thirty-eight days the fin-like limbs show swellings for the hands (hand plates), and its whole size has doubled. Elbow regions become recognizable between forty-four and fifty-seven days; at the end of this time toes have sprouted and eyelids are well formed. The entire process of organogenesis is complete by the end of the eighth week. It lives on, calm and serene in the depths of the mother's womb—"that other world, the truest microcosm" in the words of Sir Thomas Browne. Beneath the vault of its cavern, it is yet encapsulated in a system of membranes of "chorionic sac," only a restricted area of which develops into the placenta, the complex structure that permits close interdigitation between fetal and maternal tissues.

An odd presence, the placenta, shares the fetal living space. Mark that it, too, is a living presence, since it can develop alone in the absence of an embryo. Little wonder that in many cultures this organ is viewed as the fetus's twin. Physiologists tell us that the placenta subsumes the functions of all the major organs before birth, thereby lending a certain air of scientific respectability to the wildest contentions of myth and folklore. The placenta is the fetus's "double"; not a copy of a developing human, but its shadow. It functions as a lung, since it establishes gas transfer before the fetus emerges to the ambient air; as an intestine, in absorption of nutrients; as a liver, for metabolism and detoxification; as a kidney, connected with regulation of water and the acid-base balance of the organism; as endocrine system, in secreting hormones; and so on. As its multifarious protection is plain, the myth-making imagination—Gaston Bachelard was fond of saying "the material imagination"—has no trouble seeing a simultaneous power to inflict harm. Consequently it becomes a universal concern to determine the best manner to dispose of this organ once it is expelled. An organ anatomically and physiologically tied to the fetus by the umbilical cord, and on a mystical plane capable of influencing its whole future life-course, must be handled with extreme care.

Anthropologists and ethnographers have yet to compile the entire catalogue of local customs for placental disposal. Here it is buried promptly, lest it trigger dreadful plagues; there only after elaborate ceremonies; sometimes under a tree, to ensure the fertility of the fields; other times near the homestead, to secure the undeviating attachment of the individual to family and country. Or else it must be placed in a pot and washed, as in some rural Thai communities, to ward off the baby from skin diseases; or in a tray bedecked with flowers and floated down the river, at night, to please the crocodiles, as in Java; or thrown into the sea to propitiate a bounteous harvest of fish, as in the Marshall Islands. Scholars surveying over 300 different cultures found that only 7 seemed unconcerned about the manner of disposal of the placenta.

Moored to the placenta by the umbilical cord, like a vessel to the pier, a fetus rocks to and fro, now rising, now falling, ever so slowly, in its watery environment. To the elementary imagination all that is liquid is water, and it is fitting that the embryo and fetus be suspended in this milieu, itself the seedbed of life. Two thousand years ago, Thales recognized water as the reservoir of all potentialities of existence; Christian writers, like Tertullian, saw in it "the seat of the divine Spirit," since to it alone among all primeval substances was given the order to produce living creatures (*De Baptismo*, III-V). Earth is solidity, the abutment for our bodies and the seat of our sustenance; air is immateriality and indefinite expansion; fire is pure energy, approaching us as welcome light and warmth, or as wind-driven, hissing devastation. But only water is cradle. Only water can impart that total, warm caress that lulled us all into the hypnotic trance of prenatal life, where no thoughts of finitude and decay, no pangs of contradiction and want, intrude in the consciousness.

Water is at one time cradle and tomb

Yet the sign of water is both positive and negative. Life is bodied forth from water, but water can kill. The symbolism of baptism implies submersion into the life-giving waters of the sacred. It is regeneration through rebirth, but in order to be reborn one must die first: the old self dies, and the new self emerges to life. Water is at one time cradle and tomb.

Nothing symbolizes better the bivalence of nature than those bottles containing the products of conception, which one sees in pathology laboratories or in collections of natural history museums. The fetus is there suspended in a liquid, but this liquid is not the cleansing, vivifying water of its original existence: it is a fixative to preserve its structure in death. The membranes of the chorionic sac screen the developing being from noxious influences, but pathologic specimens tell us that sometimes they tear, and their torn

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strands float waving in the amniotic fluid, encircle the fetus, constrict its limbs and may amputate its parts. The umbilical cord conveys the nourishment to the fetus as it rocks voluptuously, languorously, in the bosom of its mother. But look at this specimen in a jar: in its listless wanderings the fetus has looped the cord about its neck, and fashioned a constricting "figure-of-eight" knot that squeezed out its lightless existence forever. About 3 percent of perinatal deaths are due to loopings, torsions, twistings, and other accidental entanglements. Did a maleficent deity think of both the protection and the danger? This proposition is discussed by Leibniz in his *Theodicy* (Part, 2, 121, VI):

> To deprive a man of his life by giving him a silk rope knowing that he will use it to strangle himself, is as much a murder as to stab him ourselves, directly or through paid assassins. One does not will his death any less in using the first means than the two others: it seems, rather, that one wills it with greater malevolence, since he is left with both the fault and the reproof for his perdition.

The subtle philosopher concludes that this reasoning cannot apply to the workings of the Creator, but all his casuistry leaves us still doubting.

Popular accounts of conception and embryo-fetal development easily lapse into rapturous odes to the invincible powers of nature. Conception is often celebrated in Anacreontic stanzas where all is mirth, and hope, and rejoicement. It is well that this be so, for in the embrace of lovers about to become parents there is something like an obscure, formless yet insistent promise of immortality, so the Diotima could define man-woman love, in the Banquet, as "love and immortality." Eternity seems at hand. And when conception occurs, at the very instant of its realization when the flame of a new life is kindled, it seems as if countless sublime possibilities were suddenly mobilized, and the speed of the wheel of time accelerated. When the bottles of champagne are uncorked to salute an infant's birth, who will dare tell the celebrants that on the topmost froth of their drink there is a flavor of death? Who will tell them that the nectar of life comes dashed with flecks of death?

Perhaps no one has to say this. Each one, in due course, will come to realize the life-death bivalence of human existence. The lover who feels transfigured by the power of love salutes in himself "a new man," yet mourns the death of his former self. The parents who exult at the life of their child are thereby reminded of the passage of time, and handed an obscure premonition that a new generation approaches, like a tidal wave, to replace them. The mother who senses a new life stir in her womb also experiences dramatic changes in her entire body, and therefore a heightened sense of the precariousness and fragility of life. The scientist who scrutinizes the development of new life knows it for an incredibly complex welter of permutations, combinations, chemical reactions, and exchanges that must take place in an exquisitely orchestrated fashion. No trials are allowed: genes must be activated at exactly the right time, enzymes released as preordained, and all this under perpetually changing conditions. The slightest misstep, the most trivial omission, asynchrony or incorrect performance, and the price is death.

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Nothing in conception and birth speaks to us about death, yet all in conception and birth speaks to us about death. The products of conception symbolize life's eclosion, its fruitfulness and unflagging, victorious increase. Yet the products of conception symbolize fruitlessness, shriveling, ashes, and death. Nothing in hope, life, love, and the future expresses death. Yet all in hope, life, love, and the future proclaims death, and nothing but death. I could conclude that, as in the American saying, the same glass is half-full or half-empty according as to whether the viewer is an optimist or a pessimist, respectively. Or I could invoke the Spanish verse: *Todo es segun el color / Del cristal con que se mira*, claiming that "things take the same color as the viewer's colored glasses." However, these similes would be inadequate, because they imply that the expressions of nature are univocal, and the message is distorted by the interpreter. But I do not believe that the message of nature is one, which is made to sound gladdening when read by Doctor Pangloss and ominous when the scholiast is Doctor Gloom-and-Doom. Rather, the texts of nature are double, like palimpsests that may be read right-to-left or left-to-right, and each reading delivers a different and contrary meaning. Neither palindromes, in which the sentences read the same backward and forward, nor single texts that can be made subservient to the temperament of the reader, but twin texts, each as forceful and impressive as the other—and both equally truthful. We read the one most frequently, because we find it soothing; the other one brings no solace, but may be read in many objects around us. I spotted it in formalin-containing bottles labeled "products of conception." □

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Richard Alleva

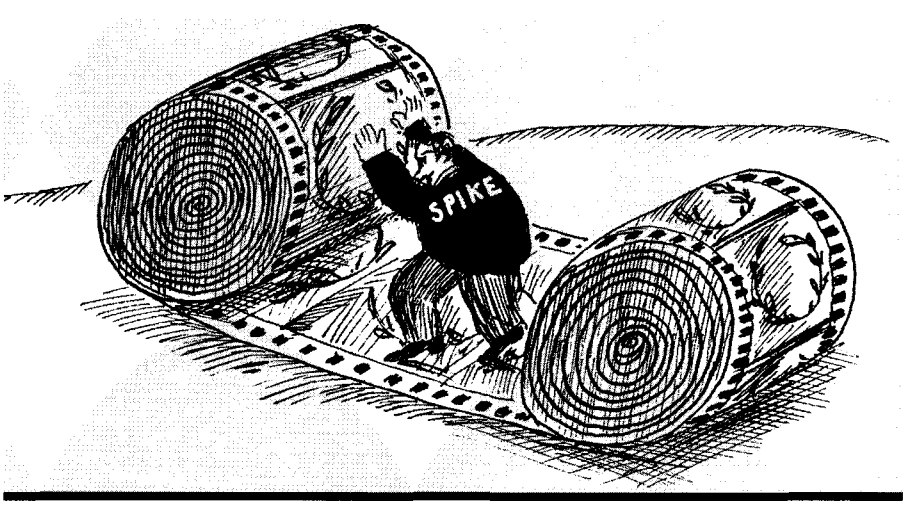
'CLOCKERS': ACTION WITHOUT DRAMA

Spike Lee, sociologist

Peck's bad boy makes good. That's the gist of what most critics have written about Spike Lee's *Clockers*. You can hear the sigh of relief rustling through their analyses. Ticked off by the in-your-face cockiness of Lee's earlier films and especially by what they took to be the reverse racism and incendiary promptings of *Do the Right Thing*, reviewers are now expressing gratified surprise at the unambiguous and unexceptionable messages of this movie: selling drugs will turn you into a corpse; the violence of outlaws eventually plagues the innocent; contempt for law-abiding, upwardly striving blacks by other blacks is deplorable. Most startling of all, perhaps, is the portrayal of the chief cop in this movie, Harvey Keitel's homicide detective, as a basically decent man—this from the number-one, cinematic scourge of the N.Y.P.D! No wonder that the fatted calf has been requisitioned and a banquet of praise laid on.

I'm afraid I can contribute only to the first course. There are things to praise in *Clockers* and some of them are artistic as well as moral. For this story, adapted from Richard Price's novel, about a young drug dealer who finds himself under suspicion for a murder to which his older brother has already confessed, Spike Lee provides an asphalt jungle setting of poetic veraciousness that plunges the viewer into heat, noise, and a sort of becalmed desperation interrupted by violence. While Lee's usual cameraman, Ernest Dickerson, always mellowed Lee's movies with a salmon-hued, late-afternoon light, Malik Hassan Sayeed here creates a look dominated by blacks and reds. Some of Sayeed's effects are overdone, even hammy, as when his overlighting of an interrogation room threatens to turn the Q&A into a close encounter of the third kind, but he does achieve an overall evocation of night lurching into bleary dawn, a perfect visual rendering of the world of "clockers," those kids so hungry for money and status that they deal drugs round the clock in defiance of law and exhaustion and even the need to go to the bathroom.

There are excellent sequences, written by Price with an ear attuned to the language of the street but not infatuated with argot. When detectives examine a recently dispatched drug dealer's corpse, their jaded ribaldry does more to portray the obscenity of violent death than any slickly staged murder scene could. Drug boss Delroy Lindo, referring to his number-one assistant, Strike, as his "sword and staff," makes you hear the voices of the good Baptist folks who were this monster's ancestors and whose Bible language still permeates his gangster talk, and when you see twelve-year-old boys with their headphones plugged into "gangsta rap" outside the boss's headquarters while awaiting his orders and observe how they strut in place to the beat of the music, you get a good idea of how style ushers in violence; song teaches strut; strut bolsters attitude; attitude armors kids for violence.



I'll deal with Mekhi Phifer in the lead role of Strike in a moment. The rest of the cast is impeccable. Delroy Lindo was menacing enough as a crime lord in *Malcolm X*, but here a coating of paternal benevolence makes him even more frightening. Isaiah Washington as the self-accused brother convincingly embodies decency frayed by frustration. To say that Harvey Keitel plays a furious, foulmouthed but compassionate cop nearly obviates any praise of his performance. Keitel owns this territory and he struts around in it like a prize bantam.

The superb jazz composer Terence Blanchard has graced the soundtrack with gorgeously melancholic music, though there is a bit too much of it. When Lee needs a more insolent sound, he switches to rap and cuts his images to that very different beat. And the editing is notable. It's always precise, but what's especially compelling is the way Lee often snips off a scene a few seconds before a routine director would, then jumps us into the next sequence just a bit past *its* conventional starting point. These slight elisions jolted me alert whenever I felt my attention wavering.

But why was my attention wavering so often during *Clockers*?

The answer startles me even as I give it. The film isn't very dramatic. Eventful, yes. Violent, certainly. Beatings, shootings, interrogations, threats, recriminations abound. But real drama—as long

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as we're not speaking of melodrama or farce—isn't defined by external action. Drama is the ride to revelation, crystallization, epiphany taken by one or more protagonists. In *My Dinner with André*, Wallace Shawn and André Gregory sit at a restaurant table, talk, eat. Nothing else. Yet, because you feel how the diners affect each other, how their emotions are shifting, something dramatic transpires.

There's no such inner movement within *Clockers*'s well-orchestrated turbulence. The hero, Strike, learns at the beginning of the movie that his boss wouldn't mind having another drug dealer eliminated. Strike, eager to climb up the ladder of criminal success, plans the murder. But when it comes time to kill, the director skips into the next scene. The rival dealer is murdered, all right, but by whom? Does the perpetual look of anguish on Strike's face signal remorse? an innocent man's bewilderment at being accused? fear that his brother really did the crime? nausea at his own moral corruption? or a mixture of all the above? It's impossible to tell (before the conclusion) because Spike Lee gives us no access to Strike's mind. The filmmaker has endowed his protagonist with the opacity of one of the suspects in a detective story, even though *Clockers* isn't a detective story but a character study taking place in a criminal milieu. It's as if Dostoevski had left the murder scene out of *Crime and Punishment* and then teased us throughout the book with the iffiness of Raskolnikov's guilt. If *Clockers* were a detective story, then Keitel's detective would be its true protagonist and we would puzzle out the crime's solution from his point-of-view. But, no, Strike is the real protagonist, and he is nothing but an anguished blank.

Poor Mekhi Phifer! Far from coaxing a performance out of this novice, Lee uses him as a punching bag. Probably because the director wants to warn kids about the misery of a drug dealer's life, he isn't content with portraying the hero's spiritual anguish but has him pummeled repeatedly by a neighborhood cop, pistol-whipped by his boss, roughed up by police drug squads, socked by kids in the neighborhood, jerked about physically and intellectually by Keitel, and even briefly slapped around by an understandably outraged neighborhood mom. Strike should have been called Struck.

Because Lee is great at limning the ghetto environment, we see the cause of Strike's pain all around him. But that's not the same as being taken inside the pain. For Lee—and therefore for us—the mind of this "clocker" seems *terra incognita*. No matter how stirring, no matter how laced with Spike Lee's rough poetry, sociology is not drama. □

MEDIA

Frank McConnell

EPIC COMICS

Neil Gaiman's 'Sandman'

A few years ago I wrote a column for *Commonweal* (February 28, 1992) on comic books and how they had become a refuge for some very fine, and very serious, storytellers. And I signaled that *Sandman*, written by Neil Gaiman, was not only a wonderful comic but one of the best bits of fiction altogether being produced these days.

Now I have to make a correction. *Sandman* is not one of the best pieces of fiction being done these days: as it approaches its conclusion, it emerges as *the* best piece of fiction being done these days. And that, not just because of the brilliance and intricacy of its storytelling—and I know few stories, outside the best of Joyce, Faulkner, and Pynchon, that are more intricate—but also because it tells its wonderful and humanizing tale in a medium, comic books, still largely considered *demimonde* by the tenured zombies of the academic establishment.

And never mind also that Gaiman has won awards and admiration and, most important for a writer, envy, from the whole civilized world. What he has done with *Sandman* is establish the fact that a *comic book* can be a work of high and very serious art—a story that other storytellers, in whatever medium they work, will have to take into account as an exploration of what stories can do and what stories are for.

Not that he doesn't have antecedents, and not that he doesn't acknowledge them. Will Eisner and Jack Kirby in the forties, Wally Wood and Carmine Infantino in the fifties, and lately Frank Miller and the superbly gifted Alan Moore—all of whom have been demonstrating that comics are a legitimate fictive mode—or, in Gaiman's simpler, better phrase, a machine for storytelling, no

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less rich, and no less exciting, than any other.

There are nods, throughout the issues of *Sandman*, toward all of those strong precursors: Gaiman is not the sort to forget or pretend to forget his guildmasters.

Nevertheless, with some excitement, I have to announce that *Sandman*, at issue number 71 as I write this in September, and with maybe three or four more issues to go, is a new thing. With the conclusion of the series, which began on a monthly basis in 1988, Gaiman will have created a single, massive tale—as long as a Henry James novel—which works both as an allegory of the story-telling imagination (a "metafiction," if we must use the word) and as—a term I do not use frivolously—a tragedy. And when I say "tragedy," I am thinking of *Lord Jim* and *Lear* and *Gilgamesh*: stories that exist to remind us of the terrible cost of being human.

Here's what happened. In 1987, DC Comics approached Gaiman to revive, with changes, an old DC character from the forties. Gaiman chose a relatively obscure character, the Sandman, who in the forties was a guy who would dress up at night in a gas mask, zap bad guys with his gas gun, and leave them to sleep it off until the cops came to pick them up next morning.

All Gaiman used was the name: "Sandman." The master of dreams; the master of stories; Morpheus, whose name means both "god of sleep" and "shaper of form" (make no mistake, when it comes to recondite allusions, nobody has a patch upon our scarily well-read lad). So he invented a theogony—a Family of more-than, less-than gods, the Endless as he calls them, anthropomorphic projections of fundamental human perceptions. In order of age, the family includes Destiny, Death, Dream, Destruction, Desire, Despair, and Delirium (who was once Delight).

The point of this psychic genealogy, is that Dream is at its center. We tell stories, create myths, write gospels of every sort, because we cannot tolerate the irrational. Absurdity offends us, as Norman Mailer says in *Oswald's Tale* (Random House), just because it attacks our sense that there is a reason for our pain. Is all this sadness for *nothing*? we ask. And the human answer comes back, again and again, no: it's for something but it may be for a little bit more than what you were expecting.

Sandman, in other words, is about failure: about the failure of the imagination successfully to encompass the chaos of ordinary human life, about the failure of all our stories to explain to us why we are such an unhappy people. Some critics—those at least smart enough to recognize the fineness of Gaiman's work—have described him

as a "postmodern" writer, and that phrase, stupid as it innately is, may begin to catch the special quality of his work; but only glancingly.

I won't detail for you the plots, subplots, and skerries-within-subplots that are the tapestry of the work: like the best of Dickens, this is serial storytelling, and part of the fun of the thing is seeing how many more balls the author tosses into the air each month, and whether he can keep them all aloft. He (Charles and Neil) does.

But I will—and now, with the series approaching its end, I can—give you a sense of its grand design.

Dream of the Endless, the Lord of Stories, is imprisoned in 1916, by a necromancer in England. He frees himself in 1988 (coincidentally the year of the series' beginning) and regains his kingdom, only to find that he has become somehow tainted—spoiled—altered—by his captivity. Humanized, in fact. From that beginning, the rest of this great and discursive series of tales is all about Dream—Story—discovering that he is intimately involved with the fate of human beings, and can in fact not exist without them.

I don't want to belabor this but in fact *Sandman* fascinates us so just because it is a parable of the epochal transformation of the human imagination that began right around the time of the Renaissance. In that age, our myths began to be humanized: beginning, say, with Shakespeare, we began to realize that the gods had not invented us, but that we were in the process of inventing our gods. By now in the series Dream of the Endless has died—or committed suicide—but since stories cannot cease, anymore than the mind can stop thinking, Dream of the Endless has also been reborn—but this time as the exaltation of a *human* child, rather than as an anthropomorphic configuration. Gaiman is too subtle to say it, but I'm not: as the series ends, the Word is made Flesh, and from now on our stories will be the stories of the gods among us, rather than the gods whose chief characteristic is their apartness.

It is the history of Western story-telling altogether, and especially of the stories we like to call "modern." It is profoundly incarnational but also—Gaiman is very learnedly Jewish—wisely melancholy about the giant cost of moving from the transcendent to the immanent. If you can really read, it is simply magnificent metafiction, a story about story.

I hope DC will have the good sense to publish the entire run, but they probably won't. I know of nothing quite like it, and I don't expect there will be anything quite like it for some time. How often is a new, and deeply human, art form born? (How often do we invent a new—a really new—sin?)

If *Sandman* is a "comic," then *The Magic Flute* is a "musical" and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is a skit. *Read* the damn thing: it's important. □

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From melting pot to salad bowl

Postethnic America
Beyond Multiculturalism
David A. Hollinger
Basic Books, $22, 210 pp.

John T. McGreevy

Books about the decline of American nationalism will surely become a growth industry. The term "citizen" frequently seems less relevant than Italian or Latino, male or female, gay or straight. Salad bowls have replaced melting pots. Even the United States as a geographical entity has become less important in an age when the availability of labor in Manila determines wages in Fort Wayne, or electronic mail to Warsaw is more convenient than a letter to Los Angeles.

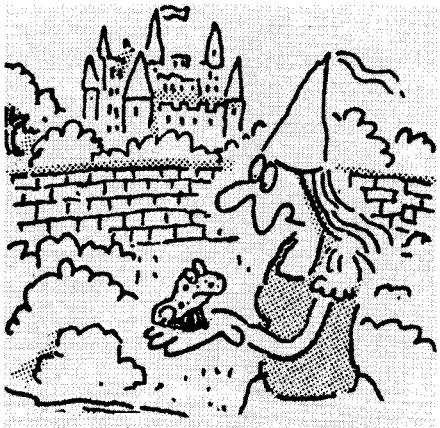
Few explorations of these matters will be as incisive as David Hollinger's *Postethnic America*, a thoughtful meditation on the need for liberals to reassert their allegiance to the national community.

This is old-fashioned advice. As Hollinger is well aware, the most wide-ranging intellectual project of the past generation has been to reassert the importance of the particular and the provincial, to unmask assumptions concealed behind abstract language. When scholars in the 1940s spoke about Man, we have learned, they frequently meant white men. Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* became the model for an "American way of life," not Richard Wright's Chicago.

Hollinger acknowledges these multicultural insights. His subtitle includes the word "beyond," not "against." What he regrets is the relentless equation of culture with the options available on census forms. Initially an effort to assist victims of past discrimination, racial classification schemes became demands for cultural recognition. An "Asian-American" culture is now assumed to include impoverished Cambodian refugees and Hong Kong financiers. Alternatively, the term "white" stretches from descendants of the *Mayflower* to Jews fleeing the former Soviet Union.

But individuals do not fit neatly within the boundaries of what Hollinger disparagingly terms the "Ethno-racial Pentagon" (African-Americans, Asian-Americans, Latinos, Native Americans and whites). More Native Americans marry outside the group than within it, as do one-quarter to one-third of Japanese-Americans. Marriages between African-Americans and whites have increased 300 percent in a quarter century.

Some advocates of multiculturalism discreetly ignore these facts, but Hollinger celebrates them. The more fluid the society and the more opportunities offered to move beyond the limitations of race or class, the more hope that current tensions might subside. In Hollinger's "postethnic" view, informing the daughter of an African-American father and an Asian-American mother that she *must* be African-American revives a most pernicious aspect of our Jim Crow past. Society's obligation is not to sustain particular cultures, but to provide an open arena for individuals to determine their own identity.



"I won't kiss you if you're just going to give me a lecture on proportional representation."

Defining an open arena is the tough part. Hollinger favors a society where individuals choose "affiliations " from a broad menu of ethnic and religious options. The content of these choices matters less than the assurance that they are made in a noncoercive environment. The wall of separation erected between church and state by the Supreme Court in the 1940s, Hollinger suggests, might also serve as a useful barrier between public institutions and the pressure to celebrate various ethnic cultures.

Behind this view, implicitly, is a philosophical stance that stresses individual autonomy. As much as possible, decisions made by parents or the larger society about sensitive matters such as religion and ethnicity should not limit the options available to their children.

While appealing in some respects, this account of the formation of group loyalties is not altogether convincing. A school system supervising the education of each student from the age of four to twenty-two that dismisses religious belief as irrelevant to modern life, for example, makes the choice of a religious "affiliation" after graduation less likely. Few traditions—religious, ethnic, or otherwise—sustain themselves through self-conscious, adult conversion. And religious people often view their faith as the response to a call or the understanding of a vocation, not simply as one among a handful of individual affiliations.

Hollinger might respond that American society cannot guarantee the survival

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of any ethnic or religious group, a burden necessarily shouldered by families and faith communities. Groups live or die in a cultural free market. All true, but building a wall between these groups and an expanding state may inadvertently shorten life expectancies.

More compelling is Hollinger's plea for liberals to reclaim a nationalist, even patriotic, language from their political opponents. Franklin Roosevelt's and Lyndon Johnson's ability to inaugurate social welfare programs in the name of "the people" is a lost, liberal art. Yet most citizens understand that obligations to residents of inner-city Detroit or rural West Virginia differ in kind from duties to impoverished Indonesians. An emphasis on this national bond, instead of a rhetoric of difference and separation, might make common responsibilities, such as health care, more visible. And a more visible public concern for less fortunate citizens might channel energies away from endless culture wars. As Hollinger reminds us, Martin Luther King's invocation of the noble goals at the heart of the American experiment helped awaken a broad public to the gap between those goals and the more sordid realities of Jim Crow and urban poverty.

A certain nobility graces *Postethnic America* as well. Hollinger is a professional historian, but the book is first-rate public philosophy, a sober reflection in a literature frequently distorted by polemics. Analytical clarity alone will not resolve these matters, but it does ensure, at a minimum, more productive disagreements. □

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A GOOD PLACE FOR CHILDREN

The Power of Their Ideas
Lessons for America from a Small School in Harlem
Deborah Meier
Beacon Press, $20, 190 pp.

William M. Sullivan

This book is a valuable addition to the developing literature on effective school reform. Deborah Meier writes not as an educational theorist but as a reflective practitioner. For two decades she has successfully pioneered staff-run, pupil- and parent-friendly elementary and secondary schools serving the children of mostly poor, racially mixed East Harlem. In a system in which barely half of all students graduate from high school, Central Park East High School has maintained graduation rates of 90 percent, with a like percentage going on to higher education.

Meier also writes as a committed educational democrat. Public education's mission has to expand as the social supports of children's lives contract, she argues. And Meier is a realist. The principal impediment to realizing the high aims of genuine education for the children and families Meier has served is a deep cynicism born out of woundedness.

It is precisely this skepticism about education, Meier argues, that makes the school as a community so important: children cannot develop their capacities unless they can sense that they belong somewhere, in a good, worthy, significant place. It is the basic mission of the school to provide that community and that place. As the sources of stable contact with the wider adult world beyond the neighborhood have declined, schools have become more significant in the lives of children, for good and ill. It is in school, even more than through television, that "youngsters learn their place in the social order and develop a system of responses to their placement that are hard to dislodge."

Meier organizes her story around a series of topics, including pedagogy, school organization, and relations between teachers and children, school and neighborhood, school and central administration, and the issue of educational choice (Meier is committed to choice but within the public system). Discussion of these issues is sprinkled with vivid anecdote, quotation, and excerpts from her journals and school bulletins. Six factors emerge as keys to the development of these successful schools.

Official backing was obtained for her first experimental school in 1974. Meier and her associates, initially all elementary teachers but for one paraprofessional, took exception to the individualistic drift of much "child-centered" progressive education, especially the pedagogical theories in vogue after the sixties. Lillian Weber, their common teacher, emphasized that education had to be "personalized" but "community-centered" as well. This led to the second theme, that education needs to focus not upon "discrete skills" but upon "strong subject matter," seeing this as the "powerful 'stuff' that makes up our common world." This focus led to establishing a set of common "intellectual habits" which led teachers and pupils alike to ask for evidence, notice point of view, look for cause and effect, to hypothesize contrary to fact, and, finally, to ask the value questions: Who cares? Why does this matter?

Next, Meier stresses how her schools required parents or guardians to come personally to register their children, starting a long-term effort to involve parents in school life. The fourth key idea was enhanced teacher autonomy, a notion that was a powerful personal motivator for Meier and all her collaborators. The pedagogical core of Meier's project is located in her fifth and sixth themes. The Central Park East schools place strong emphasis upon a common school culture, shared and developed by the staff, in which "most decisions must be struggled over and made by those directly responsible for implementing them."

Perhaps the most radical departure

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from usual practice, however, lies in the sixth theme. The Central Park East schools have tried to structure the school day to provide longer periods and fewer discrete subjects to ensure more sustained contact between pupils and teachers, since trust turns out to be so critical to effective pedagogy. At the same time, the schools have implemented a key idea from Ted Sizer's Coalition of Essential Schools: the use of performance or portfolio-based evaluation of student progress, a major effort to focus learning on producing "exhibitions" of competence.

The Power of Their Ideas shows why schools are necessarily in the business of teaching morality as well as knowledge and "skills," and that they do this in their practice as well as their pronouncements. Meier underscores the supreme importance of establishing common norms and expectations, showing by example that this does not preclude but necessitates learning how to deliberate through conflict. For Meier, these norms are explicitly those of American civic morality, with a tilt toward critical and expressive emphases. Broadly similar conclusions about the requisites for effective school performance have recently emerged from the remarkable study of Catholic secondary schools by Anthony Bryk, Valerie Lee, and Peter Holland, *Catholic Schools and the Common Good* (Harvard). In some contrast to Meier's emphasis upon expression and pedagogical innovation, however, the Bryk study found that it was an ethos of shared trust and taking responsibility for the community, supported by "an inspirational ideology"—usually a kind of personalist social Catholicism—which were the critical factors for success. Are these important differences? Are there many routes to school effectiveness? Does "ideology" matter? School reform turns out to raise very fundamental questions about what Americans need and want for their children and their society. Deborah Meier, by word and action, is helping to focus this vital debate. □

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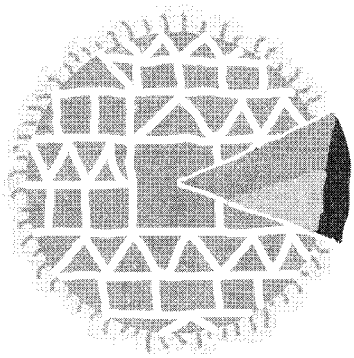
THE REFUGE OF FRIENDSHIP

Between Friends
The Correspondence of Hannah Arendt and Mary McCarthy, 1949–75
Carol Brightman, editor
Harcourt, Brace & Company, $34.95, 408 pp.

Stephanie Harrington

Much of the response to *Between Friends* has been of the odd-couple variety. What in their worlds, so foreign to each other, drew together the German-Jewish *émigré*, who had been a student of Martin Heidigger and Karl Jaspers and who would write *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, *The Human Condition*, and *The Life of the Mind*, and the younger, American-Catholic (albeit part-Jewish) woman, whose formal education ranged from parochial school to Vassar College and who wrote drama reviews, political journalism, and fiction about the manners (or lack of same), mores, and amours of a certain Eastern-American internecine literary and social set?

The unsurprising answer is that these very differences seemed to be the tinder that sparked what editor Carol Brightman calls their "passionate friendship." For McCarthy, Arendt was the personification of Intellectual Europe. For Arendt, McCarthy was her American connection, "a golden American friend," in Elizabeth Hardwick's words, "perhaps the best the country could produce with a bit of our Western states in her, a bit of the Roman Catholic, a Latin student, and a sort of New World *salonnière*." But the cliché of the attractive opposite is complicated by the fact that, despite the dissimilarities of their nurture, their natures, as reflected in their letters, seem strikingly similar. In a sense, both were orphans—McCarthy literally, and Arendt circumstantially, as a Jew in Germany, as a stateless refugee from Germany, and as a European in America. In a letter to her mentor, Karl Jaspers, Arendt wrote, "For me, Ger-



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many means my mother tongue, philosophy, and literature" but "I am obliged to keep my distance." In a later letter to him, she dismally expanded that obligation to being distanced not only from Germany, but from society in general: "A decent existence is possible today only on the fringes of society." McCarthy, in a letter to Arendt, wrote that, in cases of civil disobedience, she identified with the law-breakers "and not with...society as a whole."

As Brightman notes, both were romantics (or, more accurately, self-romanticizers) who wrapped up their declarations of alienation in heroic codas. Arendt dreaded society's purifying fringes as moral terrain where one "runs the risk of starving or being stoned to death," and McCarthy insisted that she must suffer for her beliefs "by going to jail or into exile" so that her suffering would become "a pain not just to me but to society as a whole." She did not, in fact, much suffer for her beliefs, save those she placed in assorted men, and whatever pain she may have caused a very small segment of society, she inflicted not from behind bars, but from behind a typewriter. Credit for a kind of gutsy bravado, if not good political sense, is due her, though, for her March 1968 trip to Hanoi, where she wrote for the *New York Review of Books*.

This exploit (unlike Jane Fonda's) failed to rouse America's silent majority, but it did provoke a debate in the *New York Review* between McCarthy and Diana Trilling, who agreed that the U.S. should get out of Vietnam but warned that there could be no euphoria about what life would then be like for the South Vietnamese—a worry borne out by the ensuing tide of boat people, many of whom still languish in refugee camps. Four years later, McCarthy's sacrificial sense was still intact. When, in December 1972, Richard Nixon celebrated the season of peace and good will with the bombing of North Vietnam, McCarthy, Brightman tells us, "briefly contemplated returning to Hanoi with a delegation of notables (Stephen Spender, Ramsey Clark, among others), who would, in effect, become hostages to U.S. bombs." The North Vietnamese, however, were less than thrilled by the offer, which was probably just as well, since that was a trio that Nixon would have been unlikely to regard as inexpendable.

Arendt did not share McCarthy's sense of vocation about jamming her finger in the dike to turn back the deadly surge of our Vietnam policy. Even though her political ideal was the participatory democracy of the Greek *polis*, she was determinedly not active in the antiwar campaign. In a May 1968 letter, her advice to McCarthy was, "I don't think you should do anything; I don't do anything either, except when I signed one of the many protests on campus."

But, while Arendt was conservative in political action, she was often reckless with prose. In several of her letters, McCarthy, to no avail, suggested clarifications. Had Arendt bowed to McCarthy's editorial outrage, she might have avoided the furious public response to her 1963 report on the trial of Adolph Eichmann, a reaction guaranteed not by only the tone of the book, but by Arendt's imprecise use of the phrase "banality of evil" and the word "thoughtlessness" ("the inability to think, namely to think from the standpoint of somebody else") to define the root of Eichmann's particular evil-doing, thus reducing it to a mere lack of empathy. (Although Arendt wrote, in a postscript to the revised edition of *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, that the concept of a banal evil didn't occur to her until Eichmann's 1961 trial, Karl Jaspers had used it seventeen years earlier in a letter to her.)

McCarthy acknowledged that Arendt was stubborn, easily hurt, and determined, however successfully, to hide her vulnerability. But the fragility of her own feelings did not sharpen her sensitivity to others. When McCarthy wrote to Arendt of her concern that she had gotten on her friend's nerves, Arendt asked in reply, "And what have I done to provoke that [feeling]?...What I do know is that I am...rather obtuse in all purely psychological matters." No wonder, then, that she could not, or would not, foresee the outrage she would provoke by the way she chose to present her case in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* and that she subsequently refused to grant the critical response any validity, insisting instead that it was all the result of an international conspiracy hatched in Israel. But, if Arendt remained stubbornly trapped in the life of her mind, McCarthy, as a writer, was trapped by the facts of her life. In a February 1975 letter to Arendt, McCarthy, then sixty-three years old, worried that the characters in her different novels came out as variations of each other, that "one's 'creative' side cannot learn anything." She concluded that those "confining boundaries...are set by my life experience, which lies in vaguely upper-middle class territory" and that it "all leads to the awful recognition that one is one's life; God is not mocked."

Their lives, of course, are outlined in their letters, in their talk of health, husbands (four of them McCarthy's), lovers (McCarthy's; Arendt is reticent), and bad reviews, which are unfailingly blamed on treacherous editors who assigned their books to unfriendly critics. (They, however, saw no problem in McCarthy reviewing *The Human Condition* for the *New Yorker*.) And there is, of course, the requisite gossip and backbiting that is the glue that holds together social, political, or literary groups of any longevity. Hannah Arendt and Mary McCarthy, Brightman writes, sought in friendship "a refuge from those other parties whose failures beset their generation. These included communism and anticommunism...the parties of progress and social control embedded in the behavioral sciences, and the parties of derision and doubt endemic to their own cramped corner of the Left." Of course, that "cramped corner of the Left" produced some of the most influential art and literary criticism and cultural and political commentary of midcentury America, to which Arendt and McCarthy, in their own little corner of the corner, contributed—Arendt importantly, and McCarthy spiritedly, if not enduringly. □

Stephanie Harrington *has written for the* Nation, *the* Village Voice, *and other publications.*

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WHICH CAME FIRST, MIND OR MATH?

Conversations on Mind, Matter, and Mathematics
Jean-Pierre Changeux and Alain Connes; edited and translated by M. B. DeBevoise
Princeton University Press, $24.95, 251 pp.

Robert J. White

In 1985, a fascinating book titled, *Neuronal Man*, providing a new vista of understanding of the human nervous system, originally published in France, became available in this country. Its author, Professor Jean-Pierre Changeux, offered to the educated public a most descriptive and sophisticated interpretation of brain functioning. Now, he has collaborated with a distinguished mathematician, Alain Connes, to produce a new volume that presents a dialogue between the two of them concentrating on the relationship between the human mind and mathematical constructs.

The central question that is researched and emphasized within the framework of these discussions is whether mathematics exists in all of its forms from integers through its most advanced objects and theorems as something totally independent of the mind, which simply discovers these preexisting relationships, or whether the human brain, within its cellular organization, creates and devises them itself. In the exploration of these fascinating issues, the authors not only review, in a historical sense, human thought as it relates to mathematical concepts, but also the unique association of the human brain to the world of philosophy, sociology, and theology. As one reads their carefully crafted responses, one comes to wonder whether all we know and understand is reducible to nothing more than a series of intricate neuronal cellular pathways that have been developed through evolution and embryology to form the human brain—an organ that is totally responsible for the development of all fields of human knowledge.

Admittedly, this is not an easy volume to read. It is one that may require, even with the use of the fine auxiliary vocabulary at the end of the volume, a reading pace of only a page or two per day unless one has had specialized training in both mathematics and neuroscience. Be that as it may, there are so many "points of intellectual light" within the framework of this magnificent book that one should take the opportunity to study each page with as much care as one would exercise in viewing a beautiful piece of crystal or examining a fine painting. The authors truly probe the very limits of human understanding, particularly as it relates to the brain's participation in mathematical creation.

Theology and religion in general are not major themes in their journey through human cognition and mathematical formation; yet the authors emphasize repeatedly that the brain is totally responsible for all that we know and, in that sense, has constructed the complete intellectual universe in which we live and function. In the process they have reduced philosophy and theology to nothing more than the physics of neurocircuitry. Neither of the authors demonstrates much in the way of interest in the principles of established religion. In fact, Changeux advances the concept that human behavior in a moral sense must be based on a mathematical design. He is comfortable in offering a thesis that ethics, as we know it, is both universal and mathematical, but exclusively based on a neurocognitive design. In the process of providing this concept, he defines a belief (presumably in a religious sense) as follows: "A belief may be defined as a specific state of nerve cell activity characteristic of an individual's interaction with others of his kind, a sort of model constructed inside of the brain on a biological—that is to say, a physical, material—basis."

In spite of Changeux's "mathematicalization" of ethics, one could almost argue on the basis of his descriptions of the physical nature of the human brain that it could represent the anatomical substrate for the human soul! In the final analysis, these conversations offer an outstanding contribution to our understanding of the human mind's relationship to the cellular structure of the brain.

These issues are addressed in the final chapter of the book, which is written almost exclusively by Changeux and is certainly one of the most provocative essays written on the questions of belief, ethics, and morality in contemporary society. The thoughts and concepts expressed by both of the authors render this volume an intellectual treasure, and the translation and editing are also excellent. □

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Lawrence S. Cunningham

There is not, as Joann Wolski Conn has reminded us, a generic spirituality but only particular spiritualities nourished by past traditions, particular charisms, and cultural influences. *Asi' Es*, a slim book of personal narratives, makes that point in an indirect way by a series of stories told by a range of

Asi' Es: Stories of Hispanic Spirituality,
edited by Arturo Perez et al.
The Liturgical Press, $8.95, 111 pp.

Hispanic Catholics (married and divorced; religious and lay). Even the word "Hispanic" is too generic because the attentive reader will quickly see that the nourishing roots of Cuban religious life are not quite the same as those that come from Mexico or Central America or further south in Latin America.

However different the stories may be, there are some common themes. In story after story, for example, there is an appeal to the family and, more specifically, to those parents and grandparents whose faith and practice served as the matrix from which the narrators instinctively turn in order to speak of their current faith pilgrimage. One author cites approvingly the Portuguese proverb that a "pinch of mothers is worth a pound of priests." Furthermore, there is no clear distinction made between "high" and "low" culture, which is to say that devotion to the Virgin (under her various national titles) or family altars or religious fiestas are not quaint ethnographical examples of folklore but sacramental expressions of a deep and coherent faith.

Since these are stories that are almost exclusively autobiographical they do not contain any appreciable measure of theological or sociological reflection, nor should they be expected to do so. The question that occurred to me (I raise the same questions when reviewing similar books) is to what extent such a spirituality can remain vibrant in coming generations as the Hispanic community, like its counterparts from Ireland, Poland, and Italy, becomes more "Americanized," which is to say, suburban and middle-class. As the Catholic church in this country becomes more Hispanic, will this rich panoply of traditions fall prey to the flattening out of an increasingly homogenized culture? I think Juan Sosa, one of the contributors to this volume, gets it right when he admits that his spirituality is a "patchwork" which is "composed of many elements," precisely because he is a Cuban priest, raised in the United States, and shaped by a "church in transition."

Patricia Hart Clifford is an Episcopalian lay person who had first encountered meditation practices to counter stress in her life at a time when she had left conventional religion behind her. After becoming active in her Episcopalian church, she decided to continue with her meditative practices in order

Sitting Still: An Encounter with Christian Zen,
by Patricia Hart Clifford
Paulist, $9.95, 85 pp.

to bring a contemplative dimension to her church life. In order to do this she signed up for a week's retreat in California under the direction of a Jesuit priest with long experience in Japan who had himself sat *zazen* under a spiritual master there.

This slim book is an extended diary—set out in seven chapters—describing her week of Zen practices done with a slant toward deepening Christian faith. She rightly notes that what she did not seek was "self-improvement" or conventional therapy but a way of discipline, stillness, focus, and attention in order to deepen her prayer life. As her retreat master put it: "Our aim in meditation is to identify ourselves with the Word, that is to come to know ourselves as a singular, unique manifestation of the formless source. This is the consciousness of Christ...." The hidden motif that runs through this work, in short, is the nexus between a spiritual discipline and recognition of the Logos who is Christ.

Zen retreats are rigorous exercises and Clifford makes that quite plain: she is, by turns, bored, doubtful, physically in pain from the sitting exercises, but finally confirmed in her faith and more committed to the service to which she had earlier pledged herself. The "imageless" meditation of Zen also had the added benefit of purifying her notion of God so that whatever "domestic" notions she previously held disappeared until "the presence of the holy in my meditation had actually enlarged my faith rather than diminished it." She began to see, in short, what the Christian mystical tradition had always taught: that God is more basic, foundational, mysterious, and Other than our paltry imaginings imagine. She also notes that her meditation exercises "overflowed" into her liturgical awareness as well as into her personal life.

Patricia Clifford is a graceful writer who took her retreat with the seriousness it deserves. The book, then, might well be an aid to anyone who wishes to explore the possibility of learning more about contemplative disciplines. It is not a theoretical treatise nor is it a "how to" manual. *Sitting Still* is a brief spiritual diary and should be read as such. It is also, in a rather parenthetical fashion, a portrait of a skilled and sympathetic retreat master that should remind us that, were we to enter into these disciplines, a good teacher is a must. It was Bernard of Clairvaux who once said that the person who undertakes his own spiritual direction has a fool for a teacher.

James Carse is a long-time (since 1966) and, evidently, wildly popular teacher

Breakfast at the Victory: The Mysticism of Ordinary Experience,
by James P. Carse
HarperSan Francisco, $21, 224 pp.

at New York University. Judging by this powerfully written book, he is a person of profound insight and deep compassion. His particular gift, it seems to

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me, is to see the whole and the seamless where most of us see the scattered and the atomized. When asked by an inquirer if he were a God or a magician, the Buddha responded that he was neither. What are you, the person insisted? "I am awake," said the Buddha. Carse is, in that sense, awake and being awake allows him to describe the seemingly mundane moments of his life as larger and more powerful than they first appear to be.

The "victory" of the book's title was a diner run by a one-legged veteran of World War II where Carse would breakfast. The effortless dance at the grill, the ebb and flow of daily conversations, the parade of customers, the endless bagels and coffee, the sheer flow of mundane energy is Carse's closely observed metaphor of the changeableness of human existence, just as his wife's dying (in his arms) is a pathway into the mystery of human love and the tenuous hold we have on time. Shortly before she died, his wife asked Carse if he knew what she had learned from her months of suffering. "What?" he inquired. "Not a goddam thing!" was her reply. The line shocked me when I first came up to it, but only a second of reflection made me think about how unsentimentally true and *right* it was to say that. Such a reply spoke deeply of the human struggle to live, of the untold chances we all miss to live in our everyday lives, and of the toughness of this unnamed woman. It was rather like the skepticism of God in the Book of Job when God answers the questions of Job with tougher questions of his own. God's skepticism, Chesterton once wrote, was more satisfying to Job than all of the solutions of Job's "friends."

Carse tells wonderful stories (of a reluctant duck hunt; of sailing on Lake Michigan) but what struck me most forcefully was a brief chapter on teaching as a vocation. Using the old insight of "learned ignorance" (the *docta ignorantia* of Nicholas of Cusa) he sets this chapter against a professor he once had who, immediately after entering a lecture hall one day, looked at the students, closed his notes, and walked out saying, "I'm sorry. I'm empty." It was at that moment, Carse said, that he knew that with those memorable words he wanted, above all, to be a teacher. It was the silence—the apophatic moment—that was the moment of decision. It also shaped his conviction (one to which I always aspire) that the teacher brings a conviction that is more than what he or she teaches; perhaps what is called (but remains undefined) "love of learning."

How to define this book? The advertising material (I read it in page proofs) calls it a memoir. It is more than that; it belongs to that kind of spiritual writing, with deep roots in people like Thoreau, which turns the ordinary into the extraordinary. On my bookshelf it will have a place next to writers like Kathleen Norris, Annie Dillard, and Patricia Hampl—all quite different writers, to be sure, but who all share the attractive quality of being wide awake.

Despite the somewhat forbidding title, Nugent's terse little book (three extended essays and an afterword) derives from his own experiences with the Hospice movement and, more specifically, with the death of a teen-ager who had been struck down by cancer. Nugent correlates the profound mystery of death with the Christian mystical tradition. At the very beginning of the work he notes that the sense of the experiential awareness of God's presence is one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit but, unlike some of the more exuberant gifts, this one brings to us Wisdom.

Mysticism, Death, and Dying,
by Christopher Nugent
State University of New York, $12.95, 127 pp.

Authentic mystical wisdom is a kind of death (of false ideas; of a shriveled ego; of a rootedness in an overly loved routine life), as Saint Bonaventure, at the end of the *Itinerarium*, once beautifully noted: "Let us, then, die and enter into the darkness/ let us impose silence upon our cares, our desires, and our imaginings...." To link mystical prayer with a kind of death is to avoid thinking that mysticism is always euphoria (a common claim of New Agers), since, as Nugent rightly points out, God is not always euphoric.

To cultivate mystical theology (which means, historically, nothing more than encounter with the hidden reality of God's presence among us and in us) is to penetrate deeply into what it means to be a Christian. Nugent makes the wonderful observation that Christianity does not have *koans* because all of Christianity is koanistic, which is to say, that it proposes for us riddles and gnomic aspirations, and odd challenges which are to be lived and not to be solved. After all, the gospel speaks of life coming from death; divine transcendence in the person of a baby; the trinity of persons in one God (can you meditate on that, Nugent asks, for twenty years without a grin or a grimace?), etc. In short, everything ordinary and clear-cut becomes deepened and thickened and darkened when it confronts the oxymoronic deep claims of the gospel (which is why, I think, everybody in John's Gospel seems to miss the point so often).

Nugent brings forward the testimony of a litany of people to illustrate his point from classical authors like John of the Cross (to whom he is deeply in debt and about whom he has learned much) and Thérèse of Lisieux to more modern people like the Jewish and Dutch Etty Hillesum (one of the more extraordinary personalities of our time) and the writer Caryll Houselander.

The three meditative essays in this book (do they mirror the classical three stages of the interior life?) have so many fine insights that I cannot rehearse them here. I can invite anyone interested in the life of deep prayer as it relates to our life's journey to "take up and read." Like Carse, Nugent is an academic but one who makes us hopeful about the professorate: here is a writer who is learned, compassionate, and deeply touched by the Wisdom which is the Word.

I am a frequent visitor to the Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky and here are some of the things I love: no telephones; lots of time(s) for the psalms; plenty of

My Song Is of Mercy: Writings of Matthew Kelty, Monk of Gethsemani,
edited by Michael Downey
Sheed & Ward, $15.95, 258 pp.

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woods to walk about in; a welcoming community of good monks; and the silence, especially the silence of the night. Oh yes, and there is something else. Every evening after compline, in a small chapel next to the church, the retreatants, a few monks, some of the locals, and a few passersby gather to hear Father Matthew speak. He comes to the lectern with a sheaf of dog-eared notes and xeroxes, a beaten-up book or two, and reads some poetry: Blake or Hopkins or Eliot or Dickenson or Merton. He then talks for about fifteen minutes, but it is very difficult to explain the tenor of those talks. They are funny and seemingly disconnected (I can never figure what the topic is when he begins) but they always cohere into a solid meditation from what began as an observation about the price of coffee at McDonalds or why men drive out from Louisville to fish in one of the abbey ponds. The talks always end up being brilliant (note *always*—I've never heard a mediocre talk). He finishes in about fifteen or twenty minutes, tells the audience he has said enough, and scoots off to the cloister.

Matthew Kelty was a missionary in Papua, New Guinea, before he entered the monastery in 1960 at the age of forty-five. He later spent time as a solitary back in New Guinea, headed a small monastery in North Carolina, and now, nearing eighty, is back in Gethsemani where he works at various tasks in the monastery, serves as chaplain to the guest house, and nightly gives those talks.

Michael Downey has gathered together a whole range of Father Matthew's conferences, liturgical homilies, and chapter talks, as well as reprinting *Flute Solo* which was an earlier book on Matthew's monastic life in New Guinea and North Carolina. Anyone who has passed through the guesthouse of Gethsemani will get this book in a trice, but others, who have not actually heard his voice, will profit from it. The homilies are brief but full of monastic wisdom; the conferences are enlightening and deeply felt. It is good to have in print the wisdom of a monk who has seen the world, loves Simon & Garfunkel, knows tailoring and cobbling, has a mind saturated in the psalter, reads the poets with passion, and understands the monastic life not as quaint "lifestyle" but as a way of life which, when observed, teaches a person a thing or two. Benedict began his rule with the word "Listen." One could do worse than read this good monk who has been listening for a long time with the ear of a poet and the heart of a mystic. Here is my highest praise: it is a book of sermons that does not read like a book of sermons.

The *Dictionary of Christian Art* is not a work of high scholarship but it is a testimony to the hard work of its compiler. In a single volume she has managed to cover the leading iconographical symbols, personages, events, and artifacts of the Christian (mostly Western Christian) artistic tradition. In a single volume it is inevitable that certain things could not get mentioned (for example, we have an entry on "chasuble" but not on "maniple"). Other things, for lack of space, get overly compressed (for example, is the "paten" really reducible to a symbol of the Last Supper, or even the "chalice" for that matter?) or, inadequately explained (there are only five lines on "icons"). The author describes, in her introduction, the criteria for inclusion/exclusion which does help to explain why some of the areas are not covered.

Dictionary of Christian Art,
by Diane Apostolos-Cappadona
Continuum, $39.50, 376 pp.

On the other hand, there is a generous representation of saints and their iconography, flower symbolism, biblical events and figures, parts of the body, other symbols, etc. Some may quibble with the speedy iconographical glosses in some of the entries but I noticed few factual errata.

The volume is enhanced with 162 black-and-white illustrations; a selected bibliography of English-language titles; and an index. The entries are cross-referenced by the use of an asterisk to an almost alarming degree. I suspect that this is one of the less desirable effects of software programming. The result is sentences such as: "A fiery chariot was an *attribute of the *Old Testament *prophet *Elijah."

In sum: a handy reference book which should find its place on the library shelf of the curious art lover with a penchant for matters Christian. To my mind there is only one other similar volume with as much information at such a reasonable price: the paperback Flammarion Guide titled *The Bible and the Saints* (New York, 1994). The Flammarion is excellent both in terms of its illustrations (with many in color) and capacious entries on the saints but has less on the particulars of liturgical usage, the iconography of flora, etc. Perhaps these two volumes would make good companions. □

Lawrence S. Cunningham *teaches theology and chairs the department at the University of Notre Dame.*

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STILL AWESTRUCK

Robert E. Lauder

On a sunny morning in May more than thirty-five years ago I was ordained a Roman Catholic priest. Later that day, reflecting on this unique encounter with the divine, I had an almost overwhelming sense of awe and I felt an enormous debt of gratitude to God for what had been done to me and for me.

To say that since 1960 a few changes have occurred on this earth might qualify as the understatement of the century. If we imagine reality as a mountain of meaning, there have been several earthquakes that have rocked the world and the church. Much that was firm was shaken, much that was crystal clear became cloudy, and much that was deemed immutable changed. Certainly if on my ordination day someone had predicted that eventually half the young men ordained with me would resign from the priesthood I would have laughed patronizingly at what I would have taken as silly seer-saying. My reaction would have been similar to any claims that there was a serious problem with pederasty among American priests. My image of a priest was that held by all Catholics, by most Christians, and by many members of other religions: being a priest was one of the great vocations among life's options.

Certainly the contemporary image of the priest has reached a new low. Some studies suggest that American priests have a poor self-image and have a serious morale problem. To be a priest today and not see the problems surrounding priestly existence would be myopic. Yet in evaluating my own life I must rely primarily neither on the media nor surveys but rather on my own experience. Personalist philosopher Gabriel Marcel in distinguishing between a problem and a mystery noted that while a problem is external and there for anyone to consider, a mystery is internal and personal and can only be explored from within. Being a priest is a mystery whose meaning can be explored more and more deeply but never exhausted. As a philosopher I play with mystery and try to probe it more profoundly; as a priest I celebrate mystery and try to live it out in my day-to-day existence.

In my own journey toward the priesthood I was warned there was a serious danger, loneliness. Loneliness, of course, is a feeling that has nothing to do with being alone. A person can feel lonely in a crowd; a hermit alone in the desert might not feel lonely at all. Loneliness is the feeling that I don't count, that I don't matter, that I am not significant, that no one cares about *me*. Celibacy would seem to have feelings of loneliness endemic to it, but so does all human personhood on its most profound level. To be human is to feel lonely at least sometimes. To reflect radically on loneliness is to do philosophy; to freely live out the ultimate meaning of loneliness is to be religious.

Feelings of loneliness probably have increased among American priests, and some of this can be attributed to the image of the priest in the media. The description of a priest in Paul Rudnick's play-film *Jeffrey* is not exactly affirming: "Historically (a priest is)...somewhere between a chorus boy and a florist." It has been a long downhill slide from the clergy portrayed by Spencer Tracy, Bing Crosby, and Pat O'Brien to the deeply wounded clerics in the film *Priest*.

But loneliness is a two-edged sword: the feeling can lead me to conclude that as a priest I don't matter, that I don't count, or it can call me to enter more deeply into the mystery of the priesthood and identify more profoundly with my lonely crucified leader. Loneliness need not be a dehumanizing experience. Loneliness can be liberating. It can be a powerful revelation of our need to be loved and can call us to be more loving.

I have no doubt that there are levels of my personality that have not grown or developed because I have not had a marital relationship. I believe that a lifelong marital relationship is one of life's great blessings. This side of heaven there may be nothing that can more fulfill a person than such a relationship. It will never become part of my experience. Yet I have no regrets. My life has been surrounded by love. Any absence of love in my life is not due to my celibacy but to my selfishness and self-centeredness. There is a dimension of self that only the Divine can enter and religious celibacy is one way of welcoming that entrance. If my life is not God-centered it is not God's fault. My problem is not the absence of God but rather my failures to be present. To the extent that we are loving, to that extent we are open to the divine mystery. Jewish philosopher Martin Buber stated it simply: "Love is the godly in existence."

Alfred North Whitehead was correct in describing religion as an adventure. It is an adventure in grace. More than any other human enterprise religion calls us to be heroic. It calls us to die to self and reach out in compassion toward others. The media in our secular humanistic culture have tended to treat religion as an inconsequential activity. The opposite is true.

There is nothing more thrilling than religion and my experience has been that there is no way of living more exciting than being a priest. Religion is an adventure in love and a priest is called to be at the heart of that adventure.

On a sunny morning in May thirty-five years ago I was ordained a Roman Catholic priest. I was awestruck and I felt enormously grateful. I still am and I still do. □

Robert E. Lauder, *author of* Loneliness Is for Loving, *is a Brooklyn diocesan priest and a professor of philosophy at Saint John's University, Jamaica, New York.*

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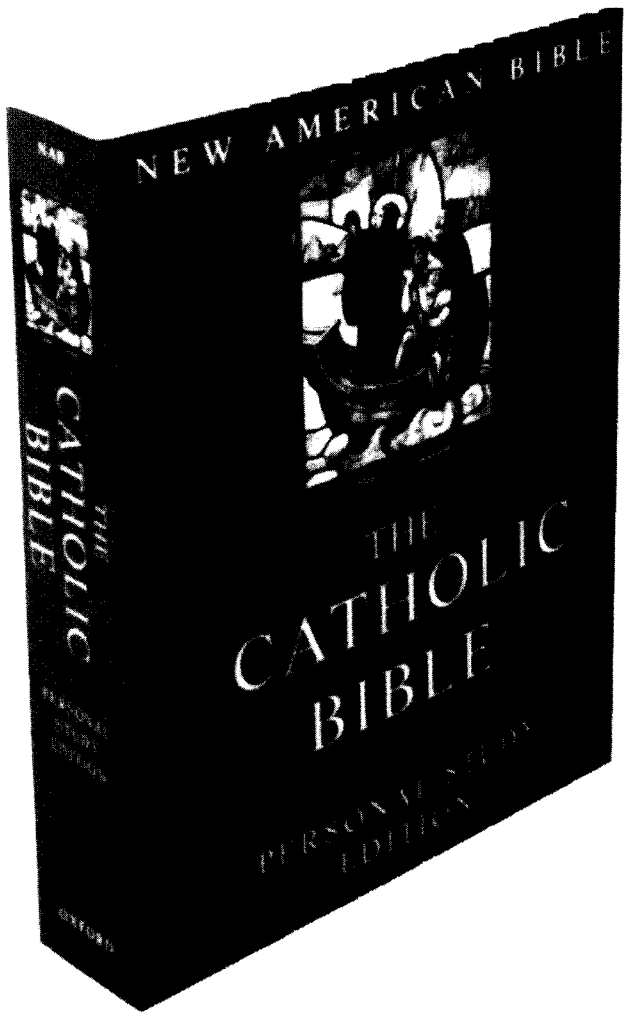

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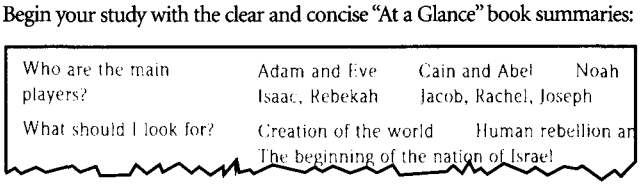

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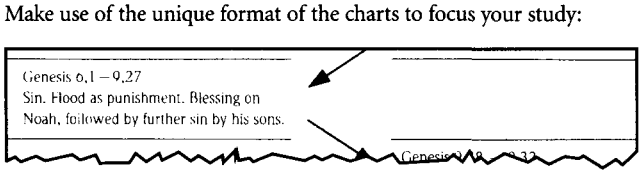

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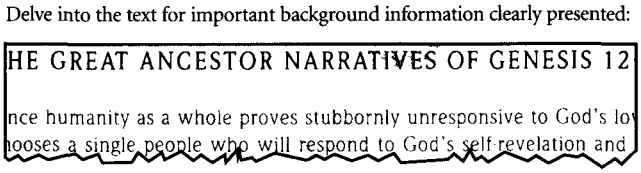
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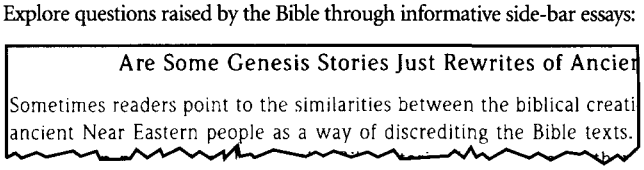
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